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A WOMAN'S GLORY.

BY
SARAH DOUDNEY,

AUTHOR OF
'STRANGERS YET,' ETC.

'Look up, there is a small bright cloud
Alone amid the skies,
So high, so pure, and so apart
A Woman's Glory lies.'
MRS. BROWNING.

IN THREE VOLUMES.
VOL. III.



LONDON :
RICHARD BENTLEY AND SON,
Publishers in Ordinary to Her Majesty the Queen.

1883.

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251. k. 528.

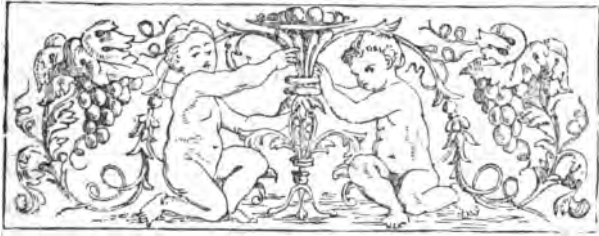




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A WOMAN'S GLORY.



CHAPTER I.

‘WAS EVER MAN SO BEATEN?’

NOT long after Eunice had left Dr. Allanson's house, Captain Torwood called to seek an interview with his sister.

It was all true. Angeline instantly read the confirmation of the story in his face.

Mrs. Allanson purposely kept the children downstairs, and Angeline drew her brother

into the schoolroom, and shut the door. She looked so intensely woeful that his own mood suddenly changed, and he laughed aloud.

‘What a face, my dear child!’ he said.

‘And all because an elderly spinster has chosen to make a fool of herself. Poor Aunt Virginia; it was rather too late in the day to try matrimony!’

‘Oh, Lawrence, can you take it so lightly?’

‘Well, honestly, I am sorry for the poor old thing,’ he went on. ‘If she had taken one of those mild parson fellows who used to come bleating round her, she might have had a fair chance of peace. But this man Castelle is a sad scoundrel, well known in all the continental gambling-houses. He is good-looking, strikingly good-looking in fact. It was his appearance that settled the business.’

'How did you hear of the marriage?' Angeline asked.

'Hammond, her butler, came round to my rooms last night, and told me everything. They were married early on Saturday morning, and are gone to the Isle of Wight for a week or two. Her maid confided in Hammond, it seems. He means to give warning. Things about Castelle have lately come to his knowledge, and he doesn't relish the idea of being in his service.'

'But why was Aunt Virginia so deceitful? Why not have said openly that she meant to marry the man?'

'Because she didn't want to hear any dissuasion. She must have acted under his influence from beginning to end.'

'Oh, Lawrence, I see through it all now!' Angeline spoke with deep disgust.

'She wanted to provide for you with a lie.'

You were to marry Celia before her own marriage took place. She meant Celia to believe that she was marrying a rich man.'

'That was why she grumbled at my dawdling,' laughed Captain Torwood. 'We were very slow over our business, Celia and I. Castelle's patience wouldn't hold out any longer, I suppose. It really is amusing, isn't it? Somebody ought to put it into a novel.'

Angeline looked at him in astonishment. Now that the first bitterness of the surprise was over, he seemed actually to enjoy the situation.

'Lawrence,' she said, 'I should like to be glad if I may dare to be.'

'Be as glad as you please, my dear,' he answered cheerfully.

'You know our father never liked Aunt Virginia. He didn't want you to have any

expectations from that quarter. He thought you would be a better man without them.'

'He was right,' said Captain Torwood more gravely. 'I've hated myself sometimes. It was impossible to help wondering how much longer that poor soul would live. Somehow those expectations seemed to develop all the meanness that was in me!'

Angeline kissed him.

'And Celia?' she asked.

'Celia will hear the truth to-morrow morning.'

She did not say any more. Her instinct told her that in losing Miss Paisley's fortune, Lawrence would probably lose something else. But her mind was very little disturbed about that second loss.

The children were heard coming upstairs, and Captain Torwood took his leave. As he went down, he paused at the open door

of the drawing-room where Mrs. Allanson was resting on her couch.

‘I have set Angeline’s mind at rest,’ he said, in a cheery tone. ‘I found her with her oldest frock on, looking awfully dismal. She evidently thought I couldn’t survive the blow.’

‘You will survive it, and be all the better for it,’ Mary Allanson answered, with her kind smile. ‘Won’t you stay to dinner?’

‘Not this evening, thanks. But I shall look in again to-morrow.’

He dined quietly in his own rooms that night, and began to look his position steadily in the face.

Those rooms of his were very pleasant, and the furniture was good and well-chosen. His regiment was quartered so near town, that the running to and fro had been easy enough, and he had stowed most of his personal belongings in these comfortable

chambers, in anticipation of the time when he should remove them to the house in Eaton Square.

The Eaton Square house was Miss Devereux's own property, and she had decided to live in it after her marriage. And it was also arranged that Captain Torwood should retire from the Service when he became a married man. Celia had no fancy, she said, for being a military lady; and did not choose that her husband should lead a soldier's life.

As he looked around him, unconsciously taking in all the little luxuries and refinements of his quarters, he began to ask himself how long these habits of ease and self-indulgence were to last?

He wondered how Celia would receive the news of his altered prospects. She was very fond of money; he had not been too blindly in love to discover her devotion

to filthy lucre. Miss Paisley's marriage would be a sore disappointment to her, and she would probably complain, not unjustly, of the deception that had been practised upon her by the interesting invalid.

Yes, she would complain; and he knew that he should never hear the last of her complaints. Aunt Virginia's perfidy would be a story without an end; she would go on telling it over and over, all through the years of their wedded life. Their children would learn the tale with their alphabet, and would grow up with the full understanding that papa had been cheated out of his fortune, and all their money came from mamma.

Of course other men were going through a like experience, and they did not look as if they minded it much. There was Motley of the Guards—pshaw! what was the good of raking up examples? And then he

came back to the idea that had suggested itself a moment ago, when he had glanced round the room with a sudden strong consciousness of its luxury. If Celia were to withdraw her promise, how long would his present state of ease endure?

He had been living up to his income, and beyond it. He owed a little, of course, but he had managed hitherto to keep out of the hands of the Jews. But Angeline had been right—quite right. Aunt Virginia's expected fortune had proved the curse of his life.

If Celia——no; he did not in the least believe that Celia would throw him over. And at this point in his reverie a faint complacent smile curved his lips; he was not vainer than other men, but he felt quite sure that Celia would never give him up.

He was almost tempted to wish that she would. Deep down, at the bottom of his

heart, lay the consciousness that she was not the kind of woman he wanted to marry.

He meant to ask her, with graceful tenderness and resignation, whether she desired to be released from her engagement? He meant to tell her that if her feelings had changed with the change in his prospects, she was free. But he did not think that she would accept her freedom; in her cold formal way, and with as much heart as she possessed, he believed that she loved him.

He got up from his chair and began, slowly and thoughtfully, to pace the room. From one end to the other he walked with measured strides, which had a maddening effect on the lodger beneath him. But as that lodger was guilty of possessing a flute, and tooting on it night and day, those regular footsteps shaking the floor over his

head might have been regarded as a just retribution.

Stopping at last in that walk of his, Lawrence came to a standstill on the hearthrug. There were photographs upon the chimney-piece; an actress or two, encased in plush frames, and Miss Devereux planted in the post of honour in the centre of the velvet-covered shelf.

Like most women of her type, Celia made an excellent picture. She liked being photographed, and never grudged any money that was expended on the photographer.

The portrait on which Lawrence gazed represented her three-quarter face with its best Eugénie look. It is true that Miss Devereux's features were larger, and her outlines much harder than those of the beautiful Empress in her prime. Yet there was an undeniable resemblance; and Celia, cabinet-size, in a rich white satin gown

with plenty of lace, looked fair and stately enough to satisfy the most fastidious taste.

‘How that portrait flatters her!’ murmured her betrothed. ‘Her nose is too large—I always thought so—and her lips are too thin. Still, she is of course a very nice-looking girl.’ He took another turn, and then came back, and paused on the same spot. ‘She’ll make an admirable wife,’ he said, again contemplating the portrait; ‘an admirable wife, there’s no doubt about that. Marriage is a state that we must all come to, sooner or later; and that’s the girl I’ve got to go through life with. There she’ll always be, before my eyes night and day; there won’t be any escaping, by Jove! It will be a case of “Where thou goest I will go, and where thou lodgest I will lodge.” And if ever I’m ill, she’ll nurse me, and never go out of the room. When pain and anguish wring my

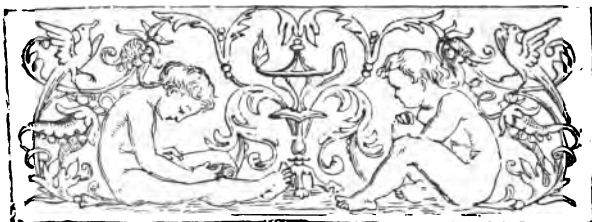
brow, she'll be a ministering angel, and a large circle of appreciating friends will applaud her devotion.'

He began his walk again, faster this time, and went on with his musings.

'My governor went in for feeling. He married my mother because he wanted her, and never felt comfortable till he'd got her. That isn't my state of mind at all. Celia is a nice girl, but I don't feel in the least uncomfortable without her. However, if you really look at the thing sensibly, I don't see why a calm sort of liking shouldn't do as well as love.'

He took a final look at the portrait, and then turned from it with a sort of groan.

'It would be so much more satisfactory,' he muttered, 'if all the money wasn't on her side!'



CHAPTER II.

'TIS NOT UNKNOWN TO YOU, MADAM, I AM
A POOR FELLOW.'

THE garden in the middle of Eaton Square looked fresh and green in the morning sunshine. The summer was advancing steadily; May had come in with clear skies and a balmy breath; windows were open, and lace curtains were stirred softly by a gentle breeze. A soldierly man, with a golden moustache, was striding along the pavement, as well-dressed and well-looking a man as could be found in town that day.

He knocked at Miss Devereux's door, and went straight upstairs to the room where she was usually to be found. Celia was a girl of methodical habits; she breakfasted early, and might be generally seen amusing herself among her plants at eleven o'clock.

At the sound of her lover's footstep she came out of the green-house, scissors in hand, looking very fair in a pale-blue morning gown.

'You are quite early, Lawrence,' she said. 'Oh, what a lovely rose-bud! Is that really for me?'

Of course it was for her; a delicate yellow-tinted rose, half-opened, just fresh from Covent Garden.

She made a pretty little fuss with the flower, and set it carefully in a slender glass vase. He stood and watched her movements in silence for a moment; then

roused himself, and began to think how he should tell his news.

‘That’s a very nice frock that you’ve got on, Celia,’ he said, drawing her over to the window.

Celia always wore what was chosen by her dressmaker; in matters of dress and millinery she was entirely dependent on the taste of those whom she employed to clothe her.

‘Pale blue is becoming to fair people,’ she remarked complacently.

‘Quite so,’ replied her lover rather absently.

He was looking out upon the sunny square, where a neat nursemaid was slowly wheeling a perambulator. One day, perhaps, a rosy atom of humanity, belonging to Celia and himself, might be trundled over that very pavement. The thought did not awaken that throb of rapture which

ought to have been produced. He quickly averted his eyes from the perambulator.

'Have you seen anything of Aunt Virginia lately, Celia ?' he asked.

'I called on her—let me see—about six days ago,' answered Miss Devereux, with precision. 'She seemed very weak and low, poor darling !'

Captain Torwood smiled.

'I'm afraid she's a sham,' he said frankly. 'Anyhow, she was strong enough to get up early and be married on Saturday morning.'

'Oh, no, no, Lawrence ! You are joking.'

'I'm quite in earnest, Celia, I assure you. I had a letter from her this morning confirming the news I had heard. It's not a nice letter.'

Miss Devereux's fair face was a vivid pink from brow to chin.

‘Oh,’ she said, ‘how shocking—how disgusting! And the man—what is he?’

‘I don’t know what he is exactly. A good-looking adventurer, I believe.’

‘An adventurer! Then he is almost a beggar, I suppose!’

‘I shouldn’t be surprised if he was.’

‘Oh, Lawrence, this is dreadful! And your prospects?’

‘My dear Celia,’ he said, taking her hand, and looking gravely into her face, ‘I have no prospects now. I came here to tell you so. When I proposed to you I believed I should one day be a rich man. But everything has changed, dear.’

He paused. But she said nothing, and did not meet his eyes.

‘It is my duty,’ he continued, ‘to offer you your freedom.’

She was still silent. He gently loosened his hold of her hand; but her fingers did

not cling to his : they slipped easily from his clasp. The hands parted ; he stepped back a little and looked at her searchingly.

There are human countenances as incapable of expressing emotion as the dial-plate of a clock. Celia's face was still very pink, and her lips were shut rather more tightly than usual ; but there were no other signs of feeling to be seen.

'Well,' he said wearily, 'I am waiting for your answer.'

'It is not easy to give an answer, Lawrence.' (Her words came out slowly.)
'But of course, as you have said, everything has changed.'

Disgust—mortification—relief—it would be hard to say which feeling predominated in Captain Torwood's mind at that moment.

'I feel that I have been basely deceived,' she said, after a brief pause. 'Your aunt

Virginia has been terribly false. She distinctly told me that you would be her heir.'

'Perhaps she hadn't made up her mind to take Castelle when she said that,' he answered, still speaking in a tired voice. 'At any rate, Celia, I have not deceived you. Am I to understand that you accept your freedom?'

'It will be best to think the matter over, and then write to you,' she replied.

'That isn't at all necessary, Celia. You like me well enough to take me without Aunt Virginia's fortune, or you don't. The thing is so very simple that it is not worth while to write a letter about it.'

He did not throw himself at her feet and vow that he must perish if she deserted him. He did not even put his arm round her waist, and tell her that life without her would be dark and dreary. He stood erect,

speaking in the calmest of voices ; and she began to feel herself aggrieved. It is doubtful, perhaps, whether eloquence or caresses would have reversed her decision ; but she would have liked a little scene.

‘Very well,’ she said. ‘I will consider myself free.’

He slightly bowed his head.

‘Good-bye,’ said he, holding out his hand. ‘I hope your life will be ever so much brighter than a poor man, like myself, could have made it. God bless you always !’

The hand that he pressed for an instant was cold. Her lips moved, but no sound came from them.

In another moment he was gone, and she remained standing, just as he had left her, until she heard the hall-door close. Then she moved, stiffly and slowly, across the room to the little table where the

flower-glass was placed, and fell to gazing dreamily at the yellow rose-bud.

It was the last thing that he had given her: the last frail link in the chain that bound them together. Celia was not, as we know, a sentimental woman, but at this moment all the feeling that she possessed was suddenly called into play. She was suffering—suffering acutely enough to wish that a flood of tears would come to her relief.

Her attachment to Captain Torwood had been the one touch of poetry in her most prosaic life. No other lover had ever wooed her so sweetly; no other voice had ever penetrated so far into her innermost self. Well, it was all ended now; he had offered her a release, and she had taken it.

Never again should she hear that light, firm step on the stairs; never again would

he come to seek her in this room, where many a sunny morning hour had been pleasantly idled away. It had been a little difficult sometimes to sustain a conversation, and once or twice she had seen the brown fringes half-veiling languid blue eyes; but even when he had been silent and lazy, she had always liked him.

This gown that she was wearing—he had approved of it. Had only half an hour gone by since he had said cheerily, ‘That’s a very nice frock that you’ve got on, Celia’? She half resolved that she would give it to her maid, and get it banished altogether from her sight. Thrift might regain the upper hand by-and-by; but just then she was reckless enough to feel as if she would rather burn that blue dress than wear it again.

And then her thoughts returned to the yellow rose-bud. Taking it out of the

vase, she began to examine it closely, with a kind of dreary curiosity, as if she had never seen and worn scores of similar flowers. It was not until you inspected it minutely that you discovered the little wire that pinned up its rich heart, and kept it from bursting into fuller bloom.

Poor rose ! it would never be permitted to expand ; it must die the death of flowers without unfolding half of its scented, crumpled petals. It was the helpless victim of the flower-seller, who had thwarted nature for his own ends. Celia liked roses quite well enough to pity this luckless bud, and think how glorious it would have been if it had opened freely to the sun and air.

And yet, had she not wired up her own heart, just as the flower-seller had wired up the heart of the rose ? She would not permit herself to give full play to her affections ; all the best feelings of her nature

were carefully compressed and restrained lest they should be too bounteous and free..

Even when her pain was sorest, Celia was not tempted to recall the lover she had sent away. She had always said that wealth should mate with wealth, and she felt she must be true to the ruling principle of her life.

She put the rose-bud back into the vase, and began steadily to fight with her regret. After all, would Lawrence have been everything that she could desire? The lover was charming, tender, courteous, refined. But matrimony has a trick of taking the gilt off the gingerbread; and Captain Torwood, as a husband, might have been found disagreeably self-asserting and strong-willed. She had never thought him a prudent man; he was one of those men who part with half-crowns when they

should only bestow shillings. And then, too, there was Angeline.

It was true that Angeline had struck out into an independent path, but who could tell how long that mood of hers would last ? She might quarrel with the Allansons, and come drifting back into her brother's way, expecting to receive the old help and support. Celia had never liked Miss Torwood ; that young woman had not seemed properly conscious of the difference between the heiress and herself. She had managed quietly to maintain her own dignity, and to let Miss Devereux understand, without any words, that the Torwoods did not feel themselves likely to be wonderfully exalted by the projected alliance.

Well, if she had resigned the brother with a pang, she should get rid of the sister with satisfaction. And then it suddenly occurred to her that Lawrence had arranged to dine

with her that evening, and go to the theatre afterwards. This plan would not, of course, be carried out ; and she must seek Mrs. Keane, and tell her of the change. She turned her back upon the rose, and was moving towards the door when her aunt entered the room.

‘Has Lawrence gone?’ asked Mrs. Keane. ‘I thought you meant to do some shopping together. Those new curtains for the dining-room ought to be chosen on a bright morning if they are to match the carpet.’

‘I shall put off choosing the curtains,’ Celia replied, and there was something odd in her tone that made her aunt look at her keenly. ‘The truth is, Aunt Laura, that Lawrence and I have parted.’

‘A lovers’ quarrel, my dear.’

‘No, no ; we shall never be lovers any

more. He has offered me my freedom, and I've taken it.'

'Did you let him see that you desired it?'

'Perhaps I did. The news that he brought has changed everything. Miss Paisley is a disgusting old hypocrite; she has never had the least intention of dying, it seems.'

Mrs. Keane was almost stricken mute with astonishment. It was the first time in her discreet life that Celia had ever expressed herself with unbecoming excitement. Even the iniquities of her maids had only drawn from her a few sentences uttered with lady-like severity; and here she was, looking flushed and strange, and calling names. Her aunt stood and gazed at her until positive alarm began to mingle with her bewilderment.

'My dear child, what do you mean?' she faltered out at last.

'I mean that Miss Paisley has been lying to us all. She meant marrying instead of dying. Yes, Aunt Laura, I am in my senses, I assure you. She was married on Saturday to some low adventurer, and Lawrence will never have a farthing of her money.'

'Poor fellow!' said Mrs. Keane, with softening eyes. 'This is a terrible blow for him.'

'He seemed to bear it very well, I thought. In fact he appeared to be quite unmoved, and asked me, with the greatest coolness, if I wanted to be free.'

'Men like Captain Torwood never make a show of feeling, Celia; they are Spartans in their way.'

'But he was absurdly haughty, and he didn't plead with me in the least. He made no allowance for the shock and the disappointment. "You either like me well

enough to take me without the fortune, or you don't," he said. The question had to be answered there and then.'

'A woman's heart is very quick in answering such questions, my dear.'

'Silly women are always in a hurry, Aunt Laura. I never speak without reflection. Even in those trying moments I reflected, and I don't regret my decision.'

'Well, Celia, I dare say everything is for the best,' said Mrs. Keane blandly. 'And it's a good thing that you are too sensible to fret about the matter.'

'I—I do suffer a little,' confessed Miss Devereux, with a quaver in her voice. 'He was very nice, you know.'

'Yes, my dear, he was very nice. You liked your toy, but you couldn't be satisfied with it unless it was gilded. On the whole it was quite right, I think, to let it go.'



CHAPTER III.

‘SPEAKEST THOU IN SOBER MEANINGS?’

MAY had come to a close, and June days were fast gliding away, when Angeline Torwood sat crying bitterly in Eunice Swift’s room.

But her tears were not flowing for Miss Devereux’s broken faith. Captain Torwood had worn his willow like a philosopher, and if his pride was wounded, his heart was perfectly sound. Troubles, however, have a trick of ‘gathering flockwise round their victim,’ and the air around Lawrence was dark with sorrows.

The little income that had been left him by his godfather was 'utterly and irretrievably lost. It had been paid to him regularly for years and years by the bankers who were the old gentleman's trustees, and no doubt of their solvability had ever entered his mind. And then, one fine morning came the news that the bank had smashed, and the bankers were nowhere to be found.

He owed money, of course. Not so much, perhaps, as many men with his expectations would have owed, but quite enough to make life hard. He could not afford to remain in the Service. He must look up his friends, and get a secretaryship or a clerkship, and learn to do without those expensive frivolities that had made existence such a pleasant thing.

To do him justice, he had faced his trouble like a man; but Angeline was

facing it like a child. For herself, she could carry the heaviest burdens cheerfully, but to see even the lightest cross laid on Lawrence was more than she could bear.

'He's getting thinner and thinner,' she sobbed. 'And there are wrinkles at the corners of his eyes. He says that something is sure to turn up soon, and he means to work hard. Fancy my boy having to work like a common man!'

'Why shouldn't he?' demanded Eunice. 'You are working like a common woman.'

'But he is so fastidious—so refined.'

'And he'll be fastidious and refined still, whatever he has to work at. Isn't there a difference between being common, and doing common things?'

'Yes; but this is an awful trial, Eunice.'

'Of course it is;' and Eunice's eyes were full of tears. 'But you are a silly thing,

Angeline; it must torture him to see you fretting as you do !'

She turned towards the open window as she spoke, and looked out across the roofs of the opposite houses.

It was evening : the June sunshine hung like a golden veil over the long dim street, and the sky was filled with a soft glory. Eunice did not see it ; her heart was yearning and aching for the poor fallen prince, who was still the hero of her dreams. There was no reason now why she should not be a fool and love him—he did not belong to any other woman ; he was poor, and downcast, and shorn of his old magnificence. After all, it was a delicious kind of foolery, even if it did make her heart ache and bring the tears into her eyes.

'What a wretch I have been !' said poor Angeline, full of genuine penitence ; 'I have no business to look haggard and deplor-

able. It can't be any comfort to him to see me making a wreck of myself. I'm glad you scolded me, Eunice ; it was a kind thing to do.'

'I was afraid it seemed unkind,' Eunice answered. 'I felt myself to be quite a monster when I had spoken, my words sounded so harshly ; but true friends have to be cruel sometimes.'

Angeline sighed, pushed back the hair from her hot forehead, and felt better. She was seated in a deep armchair, covered with chintz—a chair in which Eunice generally sat while she made up her stories, and conjured up visions of the heroes and heroines who were to play their parts according to her will. The room was not hot and stuffy—as London chambers too often are in summer—the air came freely through the open windows, and there were flowers here and there. Poor Angeline began to feel a calm influence

stealing over her troubled spirit. Eunice had not soothed her with smooth words, but her plain-dealing had done good.

‘Well, there’s one thing to rejoice over, Eunice,’ she said, after a pause; ‘he is free from that wooden woman. Heaven forgive me! but I don’t think I ever disliked anyone so much!’

‘You ought to be in charity with her, my dear child. Wasn’t it nice of her to give him up?’

‘I believe he was unfeignedly thankful, although he *did* try to sentimentalize a little. I heard one or two quotations from “Locksley Hall.”’

‘How naturally all rejected suitors fly to that poem!’ laughed Eunice. ‘There’s a line in it for everybody. I like spoony poetry.’

‘Were you ever spoony on anyone?’ Angeline asked.

'Yes ; on the men in books. On James Fitzjames, in the "Lady of the Lake," and on Ivanhoe ; and I was very hard hit by Roland Graeme.'

'Ah, the love of your life is yet to come ! Your imagination has been so busy, that your heart has never had full play. Eunice, I believe Mr. Kennard is thinking of you.'

'I hope not.'

'You hope not ! Don't you like him ?'

'"Troth, no ; no more than reason !" as Beatrice says.'

'But he is so clever : as clever in his way as you are in yours ; and he has so much energy.'

'That's just why I could never be in love with him. I'm fond of languid, indolent men ; they're so restful.'

'Oh, Eunice !'

'I could adore a lazy swell. There was

once a picture in a magazine that charmed me. It represented a man sitting in a boat, with three girls pulling him against the stream. He didn't do anything, but simply sat still, and murmured, "Wow, ladies! wow!" My admiration for that man is past explaining!

'Do you mean to say that you'd like to work for a man, instead of his working for you?'

'I think I should. You see, I've got such an immense capacity for working, that I can do enough for two. It would give me a headache to see my husband very busy; and it would refresh me to see him lounging on the sofa, and rewarding me with a languid smile of content.'

'You don't mean a word that you say. Surely you must feel contempt for an acknowledged idler? Don't you think that everybody should try to achieve something?'

I have heard you talk about the necessity of being up and doing.'

'That was when I was in a fierce and vigorous mood ; nowadays I'm beginning to feel that if I am to do "noble things," I should like to have some one near me who would "dream them all day long."'

She turned from the window as she was speaking, and Angeline saw a new expression in her face—it was not weariness, but the forerunner of weariness. To her the literary life was fresh, but in a little while the strain would begin to tell ; as yet she was but vaguely conscious of the cost of her labour.

'I think I understand you,' said Angeline slowly.

'I'm glad you do. I'm generally in earnest when I seem to talk the most atrocious nonsense. The present generation is too hard on its idlers, Angeline. Carlyle

shouted, "Work! work!" and all the smaller people have taken up the cry; now I am beginning to fall back on my Milton, and say, "They also serve who only stand and wait." The true workers would get on ever so much better if the sham ones would cease from troubling.'

'But about men, Eunice—you couldn't love a man who was inactive because he was stupid?'

'Of course not. Does inaction always represent stupidity? There are thousands of busy fools!'

'Yes.'

'I have a great sympathy with a man whose standing is above the level, and below the height. I like him for being on that middle ground. He seldom has a vocation; he is never aggressive; he sees alike the blunders committed by those on the plain, and the grander mistakes of his

brethren overhead ; he is " too low for a high praise," and too high for a low popularity. That is just the kind of man I should choose for a life-companion.'

' Well,' said Angeline, getting up to go, ' I think he would have a pleasant time if he lived with you ; he'd get more indulgence than any ordinary woman would give him.'

It did not take a long time to ' wind up ' Captain Torwood's affairs. He sent in his papers, said good-bye to the old regiment, disposed of the few valuable things he possessed, and established himself and his remaining belongings in one room. He had promised Angeline that he would not move far from her neighbourhood ; and his room was at the top of a house in a West-end street—not a very aristocratic street by any means, but clean, and tolerably quiet, and near enough to his sister to set her heart at rest.

And then he began to wait for something to turn up, just as thousands of other men were waiting in the streets all round him. He wrote to everybody he could think of—that is, everybody who had any influence; and Angeline wrote too. Between them they expended a small fortune in postage-stamps, and got in return a fair amount of heart-sickness and disgust.

One morning, early in July, he was walking briskly along Regent Street, and wondering whether he showed, ever so little, any of fortune's changes in his outer man. He had seen Angeline for a few minutes after breakfast, and she had looked as if she didn't think him flourishing. She had said nothing, but there was something wistful in the expression of her eyes. He wished she wouldn't be wistful; it worried him. He would have preferred being met with a jaunty air of unconcern; anything

was better than the consciousness that he was perpetually calling forth sympathy. Could it be possible that there was something in his aspect that moved people to compassion? He hoped not. It was quite a relief to find the old Hindoo at the crossing, begging of him just as usual.

Two ladies were getting out of their brougham at Lewis and Allonby's door, and came suddenly face to face with him on the pavement. Both were tall, one was comfortable and portly, the other decidedly thin. In an instant there was a thrill of recognition. Celia, as pink as on the day of their parting, greeted him with a stiff bend of the head. Mrs. Keane gave him an affable little bow.

It was the first time that the pair had met since the breaking of the engagement. Mrs. Keane watched Celia quietly, and with much curiosity, as they entered the shop

together. Miss Devereux had come to buy costumes for the seaside. She seated herself in the chair placed for her by the bowing shopman, and stared rather blankly at him for an instant.

‘Tussore silk,’ she ejaculated, collecting her faculties. ‘I want to look at some Tussore silks.’

Very soon the counter was heaped with soft fawn-coloured stuffs, and she regarded them with an abstracted gaze, until Mrs. Keane compassionately came to her assistance.

‘I like the darkest shade best, my dear,’ she said. ‘It will look richer than the others.’

‘Yes, the darkest shade. I will take that piece,’ decided Celia.

‘Shall you get lace or fringe for trimming?’

‘Fringe. No, lace.’

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'A good silk lace to match,' said Mrs. Keane to the man behind the counter.

Celia sat vacantly staring at things without seeing any object distinctly. Just then she was feeling that silks and laces and fringes do not play a very important part in one's life. She was by no means an imaginative person, and yet she was trying to picture a sensational scene. Supposing that Lawrence, instead of bowing coldly, had stopped her and uttered impassioned words. Supposing he had said, 'Celia, I have been trying to live without you; but I cannot.'

She could not make up her mind as to the answer that would have been given him. But she was distinctly conscious that this meeting had disappointed her. She had thought that if they ever met again he would, perhaps, betray a little emotion. He could live without her, and he was doing it very comfortably; it was that

perfect indifference that stung her to the quick.

Her heart was beating much faster than the hearts of discreet and rational young women are wont to beat. Was it love or wounded pride that was making her so uncomfortable? She could not tell.

Yards and yards of lace were respectfully placed at her disposal; but it was Mrs. Keane who decided on the pattern. Then from silks they went on to chintz cambrics, and Celia remembered Captain Torwood's tastes with a pang. She must dress now to please herself and the world; not to please him. His eyes would never rest on these stuffs that she was buying; his voice would never speak approval or disapproval again.

At last the shopping was finished; the parcels were put into the carriage, and the ladies took their places again.

'Do you want to go anywhere else, dear?'
Mrs. Keane asked.

'No, Aunt Laura.'

'Home,' said the matron, and then settled herself as cosily in her corner as if there were no such things as broken engagements in the world. Celia wished that she would say something about that accidental meeting, but she did not.

'Aunt Laura,' she said at last, 'did you think that Lawrence was looking as well as usual?'

'I saw no change in him, my dear.'

'Didn't you? I fancied he was pale.'

'He never was a florid man.'

'Oh no. Don't you think that, all things considered, it is strange he has not tried to renew our intercourse?'

'Well—no—I hardly expected that he would.'

'Of course it is better as it is,' said Celia,

sighing. 'He has spared himself useless pain by not making the attempt. Still, I did think his feelings would have been too strong for him.'

Mrs. Keane was silent.

'Miss Paisley used to say he was deeply in love. You thought he was deeply in love with me, didn't you, Aunt Laura?'

'No,' said Mrs. Keane, with sudden and startling frankness. 'I can't say that I ever did!'

She told her husband afterwards that she was utterly unable to restrain her tongue. That burst of candour would have its way. Her niece's self-complacency had provoked her at last beyond endurance.

If the truth had been uttered brutally, Celia's inner consciousness did not deny that it was the truth. Captain Torwood had wooed her sweetly; but the dullest

woman knows the difference between a suitor and a lover.

He had admired, liked, respected her in the beginning of their intercourse, and had begun his wooing in the honest belief that love would come. How was it that it didn't come? A sillier, plainer girl who could have given herself and her wealth unreservedly (as Portia did) would have won all Lawrence Torwood's heart in return.

But Celia could never divest herself of the conviction that she was a great prize. She exacted deference, submission, an unquestioning assent to all her proposals. She thought that her money gave her the right to rule, and had a perfect confidence in her own power of ruling.

No, he had never loved her; Aunt Laura was right. But that glimpse of his face to-day had painfully convinced her that she was very nearly loving him still.

‘We will not talk about him any more,’ she said stiffly, but her voice was not quite steady.

‘I hope I haven’t pained you, my dear,’ rejoined Mrs. Keane, already penitent. ‘But I quite agree with you that it will be best to drop the subject entirely. There are other men, you know, who will——’

‘Oh yes; plenty of them, Aunt Laura. All are not blind and insensible!’ remarked Celia, bridling. And then there was silence.



CHAPTER IV.

‘SHE CHARM’D MY SOUL, I WISTNA HOW.’

THE Nettervilles left town early in July. Now that her mission was accomplished, there was small need for Bride to waste her bloom in London. All the world knew that her marriage was already planned. She was an acknowledged success; a triumphant beauty; and no one was more hearty in her congratulations than her trusty friend Cora Wallace.

It was late in June before Cora arrived

in town. A series of delays had detained her abroad, and changed all her programme for the spring and summer. And when at last she reappeared in the fashionable world, it was to find her little Seacastle friend transformed into a reigning belle, and the affianced wife of Lord Inglefield.

Lady Emily was to have gone down to Brackenhurst with the Nettervilles, but one of her married daughters required her presence. Bride felt quite sorry to part with her. She had performed the duties of a chaperon with so much tact and pleasantness that the girl had learned to like her.

‘Who will take your place, Lady Emily?’ she said. ‘I shall miss you dreadfully at Brackenhurst.’

‘You are very kind, my dear child,’ replied Lady Emily, really flattered. ‘If you feel that you must have an old married woman at the Hall, my sister will be

delighted to go with you. Anne is a gentle soul, who gets on well with everybody.'

So Lady Anne Waring went down to Brackenhurst, and was found to be an agreeable and useful person in the household. She was not so amusing as Lady Emily, and had always been looked upon by her family as an amiable fool. And as she was a widow with small means, it had become one of Lady Emily's duties to get her invitations to good country houses in the summer—houses where luxuries were plentiful, and hosts and hostesses did not require too much from their guests. In truth, it was not much that poor Lady Anne had to give. Her conversational powers were small; she could not get through the simplest dance-music without blunders; she was an execrable whist-player. But she was gentle and sweet-tempered, and hurt nobody by word nor by deed; and Bride,

who liked elderly ladies in caps, was glad to have her.

Cora Wallace, too, was invited to Brackenhurst, and went there readily enough.

Everyone seemed to be looking forward to a particularly pleasant summer. Lord Inglefield owned a small house about a mile and a half from the Hall, and would be always coming and going. His old grey mansion was situated in a bleak Northern county, where the air was too keen for a man who had lived much in the sunny South. There were other reasons, too, why his ancestral home was not pleasant to him. Certain it is that the overgrown cottage, on the outskirts of Brackenhurst, was his favourite English residence. It had no unhappy associations, no dark memories; and there he could paint his pictures and write his poems in peace.

'He's a grand, beautiful man, my darling,' said old Hannah to her young mistress. 'It does seem to me, dearie, as if all the treasures of the world were being poured out at your feet!'

'Yes; that's just the feeling that I have,' Bride answered. 'And sometimes I think they are being poured out too fast, and I shall soon get to the bottom of the bag.'

'Now that's a thankless sort of thought,' said the nurse, shaking her head.

'Isn't it? And I'm a thankless sort of woman. But we won't discuss my imperfections. Do you know, Hannah, that your kind old face is one of the nicest things I've seen for a long time?'

'I hardly thought you'd miss me up in town, dearie.'

'What a fib!' said the girl, resting a velvet cheek on the old woman's shoulder.

'How is it possible for me to take any

interest in Jones as a human being? She's a clever creature in her way; but I've a notion that if I cut her open I should find a pin-cushion instead of a heart. She's never tired, no matter how late she sits up; there are never any wrinkles in her gown. I can't divest myself of the idea that she is stuffed with saw-dust.'

'Nature never made her figure; I've always said so,' remarked Hannah, with irrepressible triumph.

They were sitting together in Bride's room upstairs. It was drawing near the dinner-hour, but the young lady seemed to have forgotten the business of dressing, and nestled up to Hannah with infinite content.

'There's no such view as this to be seen from London windows,' said the good woman, looking out upon the rich woods, now growing golden in the evening light. Overhead was a soft sky, beautiful with

amber clouds that hung motionless above the trees. It was the loveliest hour of the day, and no county in all England could offer a fairer scene. Yet Bride seemed to gaze at it with weary eyes.

'Do you know what I'm seeing now?' she said suddenly. 'I will tell you. I am looking at the tower of a ruined castle, grim and rugged and grey. The setting sun gilds its masses of ivy, and the tide comes creeping up and up, till it covers the stony beach, and reaches the mouldering old walls. I can see the crazy fishing-boats rocking gently on the ripples, and Hawthorn Island lying bathed in the low sunlight. And I'm seized with a strange love and longing for the place that I hated so much while I lived in it. Oh, Hannah, why is this? Why do I care for it now, and here?'

'How can I tell, dearie?' asked the nurse, in an uneasy tone. 'You're far too full of

fancies. Why not try to banish the dreary old scenes from your memory? You'll not go to Seacastle again till you are Lady Inglefield, and your husband lets you visit the good old people in the old home. But you have done with the girlish life, Miss Bride, and you mustn't get dreaming about it any more.'

'Yes, I've done with it, Hannah. But it hasn't done with me. Is it my fault if ghosts appear? Often and often I see visions that I don't want to see, and dream old dreams that I long to forget.'

'You will be different when you are a wife,' said the old woman hopefully.

'Yes, yes; the wedding-ring works wonders,' Bride answered with a little laugh. 'I've been talking sad nonsense, haven't I? And now you must dress me, Hannah. I told Jones that I shouldn't want her this evening.'

What change was there in Cora Wallace? She was not quite the same Cora, but never, even in the days of the Seacastle friendship, had Bride liked her so well. Her cynicism was forgotten or laid aside ; she had grown softer and sweeter, and yet more brilliant. Her voice had mellowed tones ; she talked in a new strain about men and women and life. Bride felt that she had undergone some mysterious process, which had taken out of her nature all that was hard and bitter.

Her beauty, too, had increased, and was now so brilliant and vivid in its character that it lit up dark places with the splendour of a gem. The hazel eyes were more languid, yet more lustrous ; the bloom on the cheek deeper ; the lips a richer scarlet. Everyone who looked at her was reminded of some gorgeous tropical flower. Even Sir Bertram, who wasted few thoughts on

women nowadays, declared that she was the handsomest girl he had ever seen.

Guests came and went, and Bride's duties as a hostess left her less time with her lover than he desired. But Cora adapted herself readily to all his tastes and ideas, and Bride was well pleased. She had been half afraid that they would have disliked each other. How could Cora's cold worldly-wisdom accept his utopian dreams? How could she be led to believe in a humanity that she mocked and despised? Yet here she was, looking and talking as if she had never lost faith in human nature at all!

'Alfred, I am glad you like Cora Wallace,' said Bride to Lord Inglefield one evening.

They were sauntering up and down the terrace together in the glow of the sunset. All around them was the world of summer

in its deepest flush. The air was heavy with perfumes ; the gardens were splendid with pink and scarlet and gold. There was a mimic lake in the grounds, where the ivory chalices of lilies rested on the clear brown water. And Cora wandered by its brink alone, looking down thoughtfully into the lily-cups.

The pair on the terrace watched her as they walked. She wore a rich gown of Spanish lace, and had a bunch of deep crimson flowers in her bosom.

‘Like her!’ Lord Inglefield repeated. ‘It wouldn’t be at all easy to dislike her, I fancy.’

‘And yet I think you might have disliked her if you had known her last year. She used to sneer at the very things that you believe in. It must be your good influence that has made her so much softer and nicer.’

He smiled, not ill pleased.

‘My dearest child,’ he said, ‘you think far too much of me and my influence.’

‘Oh no. You are very good, Alfred. The best man I ever saw in my life.’

‘You know very little of men and their ways, dear. Do not over-rate me.’

‘I don’t think I do. Sometimes I’m afraid that I don’t thoroughly appreciate you. Mine is only a commonplace girl’s nature, and yours——’

‘I won’t let you run yourself down,’ he said, putting his arm round her waist and drawing her closer to him. ‘My darling, do you think I could have fallen in love with a commonplace woman? That is a poor compliment.’

Cora, looking up from the water-lilies, caught a glimpse of the pair, and smiled bitterly. Just so might King Arthur have looked at Guenevere, she thought, before he

had found out the other man who lay hidden in her heart. Lord Inglefield, with his knightly head bent, and his arm encircling that slim yet stately figure, was the very prototype of the blameless king in the days of his blind belief. And Bride, with her bright hair and pale proud face—was she altogether unlike the fair queen who loved Lancelot before her eyes had ever rested on her lord ?

‘Haven’t you idealized me?’ Bride asked, lifting her blue eyes to his. ‘Does it answer to idealize people and expect them to live up to your idea? That’s how Arnold used to manage his boys. I wonder how many of them disappointed him !’

‘A good many, I dare say. But, Bride, that doesn’t prove that his plan was a bad one. At any rate, it must be a better plan than believing the worst of a person until

he actually sinks to the level of your belief.'

'Oh yes. But, all the same, it's hard to be perched on a throne when you know you ought to sit on its step. Sometimes good people make up beautiful characters for their friends ; and when a friend doesn't fit his character, they throw him off in disgust.'

'Are you afraid that you don't fit the character I have made for you ?' he asked, laughing.

She shook her head.

'I'm not going to acknowledge my fears. I am working very hard to live up to your ideal. Now don't talk about me any more. Look at Cora ; how wonderfully handsome she is !'

'Yes, she is worth looking at,' he said slowly.

'She reminds me of Rappaccini's

daughter, walking there among the flowers,' she went on. 'Only they are not such terrible flowers as those that grew in the doctor's garden.'

'Bride,' said Lord Inglefield gravely, 'what a horrible idea! Why should Miss Wallace remind you of the girl who was fed upon poisons?'

'Just because there is such a strange richness in her beauty,' replied Bride. 'Did you ever see cheeks with such a bloom as hers? Or eyes with such a glorious lustre in them? She is feeding on new emotions, nourishing herself secretly with new thoughts. She is a new Cora altogether.'

'You are full of fancies,' he said, unconsciously repeating old Hannah's remark. 'Yet there is some truth in the fancies, I admit. Miss Wallace does look as if she were sustained by some great hope. There

is a splendid eagerness in her face sometimes.'

'I know,' Bride answered musingly. 'I can't understand it. She used to be so cool and careless about everything. Now let me go, Alfred. There's Lady Anne making signs to me through the window.'

It seemed to Bride that Cora was restless that evening. When dinner was ended, and the men were lingering over their wine, Miss Wallace drew her friend towards the open windows of the drawing-room, and coaxed her to come out into the fast-deepening dusk.

'Do come, Bride,' she pleaded. 'I want to talk to you, and I can't talk indoors.'

'Why not?' Bride asked.

'Oh, must one always give a reason for everything? I hate "whys"!' .

'My dearest Bride, you will certainly

catch cold if you go out without a shawl!' cried Lady Anne, in a warning voice.

'As if we were in the middle of November!' said Cora, with impatience. 'What are summer nights made for if we mustn't enjoy them?'

'But Bride's throat is a little delicate,' said Lady Anne meekly.

'Is it really? Then it must be a newly developed delicacy. Not very long ago she could have spent a whole summer night out of doors without doing herself any great harm!'

A faint glow overspread Bride's face for a moment. Then she carelessly took up a white fleecy wrap that was lying on a chair and folded it round her head and shoulders.

'There,' she said lightly, 'I hope everybody will be satisfied now. If I don't go out with Cora she will quarrel with Lady Anne all the rest of the evening.'

Two other matrons, staying in the house with their husbands, laughed at the notion of anyone quarrelling with Lady Anne Waring.

The friends stepped out upon the terrace into the twilight ; two tall figures with trailing gowns that mocked the soft rustle of the leaves about them. The sky was not yet dark, a faint afterglow lingered in the west—a cedar stood out blackly against the last sallow rift in the dusk. The breath of the night was rich and soft, laden with jessamine and heliotrope and myrtle ; and large, heavy roses, clinging to the trellises, seemed to whisper to each other in the old language that Bride remembered so well.

‘Come away from those lighted windows,’ Cora said. ‘Here, we will rest now, close to the myrtle and the Gloire de Dijon. Have the flowers nothing to say to you, Bride ?’

'I don't listen to them nowadays,' Bride answered in a nonchalant tone. 'Children and young girls like to fancy that flowers have voices. But I've done with childhood and girlhood.'

Her face, encircled with the fleecy wrap, looked white and calm. Cora gazed at her with eager, lustrous eyes, and spoke in that mellow voice of hers that trembled once or twice.

'No, you haven't quite done with girlhood. Don't you remember the pale pink roses you used to wear on your olive gown? You wore that gown when I first called at The Nest. And Victor Ashburn was breaking his heart about you that day.'

Bride drew her breath quickly. Leaning forward, Cora would have touched her cheek, but the girl drew away, almost haughtily.

'I don't believe in broken hearts,' she

said ; ' and I don't like nonsense. Let us go indoors.'

' Oh, not yet. It is so lovely here. You are not going to get angry with me, Bride ?'

Could it be really Cora Wallace who spoke in that soft key, so humbly and lovingly ? Bride turned, and looked at her intently for a moment.

' How you are changed, Cora !' she said. ' You have grown softer and younger, and I—harder and older.'

' You haven't changed a bit.'

Cora's arm was round her now, and Cora's warm lips pressed her brow.

' Only that you are more beautiful. Your heart is a girl's heart still ; you have a girl's liking and fancies. Ah, you didn't know your own value in the old days. (They are not so very old !) But Victor did, and he loved you as he will never love woman again.'

'You mustn't say these things.'

Bride tried to speak sternly, but her voice died in the effort. It was so sweet to hear his name again, so sweet to be assured of the love she had hardly dared to believe in.

Her heart began to throb wildly in the stillness, and there was joy in every throb. Cora heard it, and her arm tightened its clasp.

'Don't you want to hear of him, Bride?' she asked. 'Our true lovers are not numerous enough to be easily forgotten. I found out his secret easily, and he saw that it was discovered. Poor Victor! I tried to serve him by being your friend, but I could do no more. I could not give him wealth, and set him free from all those wretched troubles. Yet I have wished a thousand times that I could have seen you happy together.'

'I must not think about him. It's all

over now, you know.' Bride spoke in a broken whisper, and Cora felt her trembling.

'How can we tell when anything is over? Life is so strange, Bride. The story that we think ended may be only just begun. Suppose you should meet him when you are Lady Inglefield. Suppose he is on his way home now, a weary broken-down man yearning for the sight of your face.'

'Oh, Cora, *is* he coming?'

The question seemed to force its way from her lips. The constraining power of her companion's will, the charm of the summer night, the balmy breath of the flowers, all these influences, working together, were too strong to be resisted any longer. She found her strength giving way (it had been, perhaps, little more than the semblance of strength), and her words ended in a sob.

'Poor Bride, poor darling!' Cora's voice was intensely soft and tender. 'Yes, he is coming. Mrs. Collington has heard once or twice. India has made him a perfect wreck. But somebody has died, and left him just enough to pay his debts. Only just enough, though. When he has cleared them all off, there won't be much remaining.'

There was silence, but a tired head sank gently down on Cora's shoulder, and rested there for a moment.

'Poor Bride and poor Victor! Ah, child, you never suspected me of having a soft heart. And even now you don't know how I'm grieving over you both. It's a hard thing to miss the one joy that makes life worth living. Hush! don't cry, sweet. We must go, or they'll be coming to look for us. We'll take them in some roses.'

A few seconds later Cora returned to the

drawing-room, and showered a handful of flowers on one of the tables. Bride, following, kept a little in the background.

‘Look at our spoils,’ said Miss Wallace to Lord Inglefield. ‘You always know everything. Tell me, isn’t there some potent spell in flowers that have the dew of night upon their leaves?’

‘They must be gathered by moonlight if they are to be woven into a magic wreath,’ he answered. ‘Are you going to turn enchantress? If you do, I prophesy that you will succeed.’



CHAPTER V.

‘THOUGH I DO MY BEST I SHALL SCARCE
SUCCEED.’

KATE RYAN, still firmly persuaded that she was the happiest woman in existence, came to the conclusion that Bride had somehow got prouder and colder. As to Lord Inglefield, he was so lofty and perfect that the parson’s little daughter was quite afraid of him.

‘I’m glad I’m not going to marry such a very superior man,’ she said confidentially to Granny. ‘It must be so tiresome to

be always looking up and craning one's neck. And Bride has no thought to bestow on any of the poor mortals who are so far beneath him.'

But Kate wronged her. The poor child shrank nervously from the frank outpourings of that happy little heart. She could not answer the girl's innocent questions. It was impossible to compare her own calm love-story with Kate's glowing descriptions of bliss. About this time, therefore, these two friends began to drift apart.

But every day, and every hour of the day, seemed to strengthen the influence that Cora Wallace was gaining over Bride. Not over Bride only. Everybody in the house seemed to have fallen under her spell. She would talk to Lord Inglefield for hours about his pet schemes. She knew his favourite painters, had always read the books he liked best, and seemed, in some miraculous

way, to be acquainted with every preference or aversion of his. It was she who suggested excursions, and planned amusements. Her eloquence covered Bride's silence; beside her splendid beauty Bride appeared to grow more pale. And yet there was never the least display of power. It was an invisible sceptre that she swayed, and no one had any definite consciousness of being ruled.

As to Sir Bertram, he was looking noticeably worn and old. The wealth and luxury that he had long pined for, did not seem to bring the expected ease. He was always restless, and wandered about the house like an unquiet ghost. Lady Anne watched him furtively, and once said to Bride, in her timid way, that she thought he could not be quite well.

'There is nothing the matter with him,' Bride answered confidently; 'he only wan-

ders because he has nothing to do. We are dreadfully lazy people, Lady Anne. I shall have to go to work by-and-by ;' but instead of going to work, she seemed, Lady Anne thought, to get more indolent and dreamy.

She appeared to take life altogether in a nonchalant fashion. Everybody told her that she was one of the happiest and most fortunate girls in the world. She had won the love of a man who was much flattered and admired by women, and yet there were times when she seemed scarcely conscious of the splendour of her conquest.

One morning Lord Inglefield entered the boudoir with a roll of papers in his hand. Lady Anne was sitting by the window with some fancy-work ; Bride, moving languidly to and fro, was putting flowers in the vases ; and Cora, with a basket and scissors, was getting a fresh supply from the flower-beds. Lord Inglefield unrolled his papers, and

straightened them out upon a table. His betrothed gave a little sigh, and glanced at him with rather weary blue eyes.

‘Come and look at these, Bride,’ he said. ‘They are the plans for my new lecture-room at Knightsbridge. You remember the spot?’

‘Oh yes ; quite well !’

‘I’m not sure that I like Gothic windows ; they are too churchified. You see, I want my lecture-room to be like a big drawing-room ; and my working friends must feel as if they were asked to spend the evening in my house. The piano will stand here.’

Bride fingered the plans absently.

‘When we have done our tour,’ he went on, ‘we shall have a grand opening of the room. We must start with readings, recitations, songs. You will sing an old ballad—something simple and touching?’

‘Oh, Alfred !’—she roused herself sud-

denly—‘do *you* really wish me to sing to them? It would seem so strange. I haven’t nerve enough for that sort of thing.’

‘Not nerve enough to sing to poor working people? I am disappointed, Bride!’

She put up two slender hands, and rested them lightly on his shoulders.

‘Dear,’ she said, ‘I will try to please you in all things; only you won’t expect too much from me, will you? I can never be so fond of doing good as you are. You are always wanting to help people, and I am lazy, and want to let them alone; but I know it is wrong to be so indifferent.’

‘It is wrong.’ He spoke gently, but gravely.

‘Yes—yes; I know. Sometimes I feel as if you had actually kindled a spark of enthusiasm in me; but it always goes out. Alfred, I’m very much ashamed of myself: don’t be too hard upon me.’

Her face was uplifted with a pleading look. He stooped and kissed her.

'You will never find me hard,' he said ;
'but, my darling girl, you will fall into my ways by-and-by, I hope ?'

'Oh yes ; I hope so ! Only I have no self-confidence. If I did try to do good to people I should always be afraid of boring them, it is so difficult to find out what they really want, I think ; we are so ignorant about each other's lives and needs.'

'But we must study their lives and needs, and find out what is best for them,' said Lord Inglefield, unconsciously falling into his lecturing key.

'Don't you think, perhaps, that they would feel as if we had no business to pry into their lives ?' Bride spoke timidly. 'I fancy that the working-classes must sometimes get rather tired of being studied so very much. I am stupid, I know.'

‘You will understand these things better soon,’ he answered, in an indulgent tone.

Cora Wallace had come into the room unheard. Rich perfumes entered with her : her basket was laden with flowers, and she herself looked like a glowing damask rose.

‘Bride has a horror of being studied,’ she said, laughingly. ‘She never can understand that other people like it. Are those the plans for the lecture-room ? I want to see them.’

Lady Anne Waring had always been taught to regard herself as a fool. Her family had often said so in plain terms, and of course they were right ; and yet she had a vague idea that she saw things sometimes which clever people could not see. She wished that Lady Emily would come to Brackenhurst.

Emily had a positive genius for managing the affairs of young people. She knew

how to kindle waning fires and mend broken links; she always kept guard over a betrothed pair, when their union was a desirable thing, and seemed to know in a moment if any danger threatened them. But Lady Anne had not courage enough to write to her sister and say that things were not going well at the Hall. Lady Emily was really needed by her married daughter, and Anne had nothing of importance to tell her. She could only drop vague hints that would probably be heard with quiet contempt.

Bride's wedding was to come off after Christmas, and the summer was fast wearing away. Anybody would have laughed at Lady Anne, and her irrational doubts and fears. There was not the slightest change in any of the arrangements. Great rejoicings were to celebrate the day—there would be arches of flags and evergreens, feasts for the tenants and school-children,

bonfires and fireworks at night. All the details were already settled and planned. Cora Wallace was asked to be chief bridesmaid, and would stay on at the Hall until the wedding was over.

Lady Anne did not like Miss Wallace. She fancied that Cora treated her with a kind of bland scorn; and then, too, she had an undefined notion that those long private talks with Bride did not bode any good.

After one of those talks Bride always seemed doubly absent and languid, and yet she eagerly sought to be alone with her friend. Cora had only to whisper or beckon, and Bride would follow her out on the terrace with alacrity. However pre-occupied she might be, she never failed to hear when Cora spoke. She would follow Miss Wallace with her eyes: there was certainly some secret understanding between them. After all, what harm could there be

in this romantic sort of friendship? But it gave uneasiness to Lady Anne.

Lady Emily had always disapproved of woman's friendships. She would never allow a daughter of hers to have a bosom-friend; and Lady Anne did not think that her sister would have looked on tamely while Cora won the entire confidence of Bride Netterville.

Cora had entered heart and soul into the plans for the lecture-room. Bride had left her suggesting alterations, and giving new ideas, and had glided away to her room upstairs. It was very quiet and cool at this hour of the day. She had grown accustomed to the quaint furniture and old needlework, and had learned to like it well. Of late she had not cared to talk much with Hannah. A little barrier of reserve was built up between the old woman and herself; and Hannah felt that it was there,

and held sorrowfully aloof. It was to Cora that she now turned for sympathy—Cora, who was never weary of talking about Seacastle days, and Victor Ashburn's love.

At first she had tried to shut her ears to the voice of the charmer. But the voice was very sweet, and Cora knew the trick of charming wisely. After all, she was not yet actually a wife. When the ring was on her finger she meant to give up these dreams, and devote herself to the realities of married life. She had believed, a little while ago, that it would not be difficult to walk by Lord Inglefield's side, and perform the duties that he would put into her hands. But somehow the thought of these duties was beginning to appal her.

The oriel window had its lovely frame of tremulous leaves and sprays; delicate tendrils quivered against the blue of a cloudless sky, but they had lost the freshness

of early summer. The old room was full of golden sunbeams that seemed to find out the quaintest things and light them up. Over the chimney-piece hung a picture in crewels, worked on silk by hands that had ceased from their labours long ago. It was a queer representation of Christ and the Woman of Samaria, two stiff figures posed beside a drab well, and over-shadowed by a blue-green palm. Bride had smiled at it a hundred times when she was in a gayer mood, but to-day she looked upon it through gathering tears.

What was this life, after all, but a feverish, unquenchable thirst? Of every sparkling draught it might be said, 'Whoso drinketh of this water shall thirst again.' She knew that feeling of thirsting again only too well.

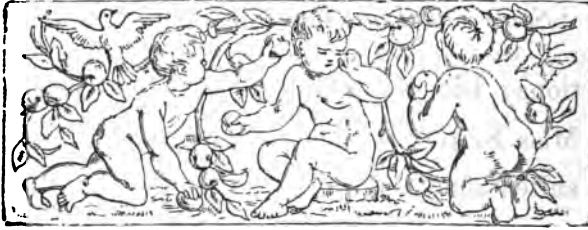
Cora, with her talk about former days, had revived all the old yearnings. For a

little while the world, and the homage of the world, had seemed to satisfy every craving of Bride's nature. But now she was 'thirsting again.'

In one corner of the old picture-frame there was a date, and the name, 'Prudence Netterville.'

Who was this Prudence Netterville? She had left only the merest outline of a story behind her. A quiet woman, tradition said, who had gone visiting among the sick and poor, and had died unmarried at thirty-five. In the library Bride had once lighted on an old prayer-book with her name written on the title-page, and a dried flower pressed between its leaves. Had Prudence known anything about this heart-thirst when she wrought the woman of Samaria with her crewels? Had her tears ever fallen upon those quaint figures? There were the stitches, just as she had set them; but

there lingered no trace of the many thoughts that had been worked into the silk. Here, perhaps, the flying needle had put in a thread of regret, here of hope, there of resignation. So Bride sat alone in the sunshine of the calm old chamber, and tried to soothe herself with these fancies ; and by-and-by Cora Wallace came in to look for her.



CHAPTER VI.

‘ SOME WITH LIVES THAT CAME TO NOTHING.’

IT was a cloudless August. Day after day came and went without bringing any change in the hot, still weather. All round Brackenhurst the corn was ready to be gathered in, and the labourers toiled with a will under the broiling sun. They talked of abundant crops, and a cheap loaf; and Mr. Ryan was making plans for a thanksgiving service of unusual magnificence. He told Kate to consult Miss Netterville about the decora-

tions ; but Kate said, a little curtly, that Miss Netterville was too languid to be consulted about anything, and she would rather manage the whole business herself.

It was true that Bride was always languid nowadays. Lady Anne suggested tonics ; Lord Inglefield decided that she was in need of bracing air ; and Cora kept silence whenever her friend's state of health was discussed. Lady Anne thought that silence rather odd. Miss Wallace was ready enough to give an opinion on other matters, but not one word would she say about Bride's depression.

Bride herself denied that there was anything the matter with her. She laid the blame of her low spirits on the weather. If they let her alone they would find that she would soon be quite well. By-and-by there would be cool winds and refreshing rains, and then she would be sure to revive ;

of course her appetite would come again if they did not tease her to take their doses of bitters. She could not bear to be watched and fussed over, that was all.

All this was not said pettishly, but wearily. She had always a smile and a caress for Lord Inglefield when he spoke in a tone of gentle chiding.

‘You take too much notice of me, dear,’ she said one day, when he found her resting on a couch in the library. They had gone for a walk in the morning, and after luncheon she had crept away to be still.

‘Oh, Bride ! Bride !’ he answered, in a voice of reproach.

She stroked his hair gently for a moment, and then a tear trembled on her lashes and fell.

‘How good you are !’ she said, for the hundredth time. ‘I want to make myself better for your sake. I want to be “trebled

twenty times myself," as Portia says; and even then I should not be half worthy of you, Alfred.'

Her humility pleased him.

'If you have Portia's spirit, darling, that is all I desire.' He spoke with exceeding tenderness. "'The unlessoned girl" may prove a noble help-meet: sometimes I think I know you better than you know yourself.'

She shook her head with a little sigh.

'You are frightened at the thought of new responsibilities; isn't that the truth? Don't be afraid, love; the burdens that look heavy are often the lightest to bear; and I shall be at your side always. You will trust me with all your little doubts and fears?'

A sudden light shone in her large blue eyes.

'I will trust you,' she said eagerly; 'yes, with everything. Alfred, we will

have a long—long talk. I will tell you all about my foolish feelings, and you will advise and guide me. Shall it be now ?’

He smiled indulgently at her earnestness.

‘No, darling—not now ; wait till the evening. I have letters to write, and you must get a sleep this afternoon.’

They were never nearer to each other than they were at that moment ; but the moment drifted by. He knelt down by her sofa, and two slender hands clasped his neck.

‘Poor sweet child !’ he thought, as he went his way, ‘she torments herself with imaginary terrors. Of course she is afraid of the new life and new duties—it is natural enough that she should be—better that she should fear, perhaps, than walk forward too boldly confident of her strength. One can soothe her in five minutes—those gentle timid spirits are easily dealt with.’

As if it was an easy thing to deal with any human soul ! But Lord Inglefield had so often been told that he could manage everybody, it was no wonder that the task seemed simple enough to him.

There was no fear that Bride would be disturbed in the library. She might sleep peacefully in the cool, dim room, among the books that few people cared to read. Her father's guests never entered that room. Lady Anne thought it gloomy, and shunned it ; but when the day was on the wane, that old library was full of golden touches that brought out all the richness of its carved oak ; and the sofa, in a corner near one of the windows, was known to be Bride's favourite resting-place.

So Lord Inglefield took his leave, and she fell into a sweet sleep. Her head did not ache now ; a burden was lifted off her spirit. The windows were open, and some-

times the brown bees came humming in, sated with their luscious feast out of doors. The golden afternoon wore slowly away: the quiet hours passed, and still she slumbered on.

Lord Inglefield had taken a short cut across the grounds, and plunged at once into the shadows of the Park. He was on his way to his cottage, and the nearest path lay through Sir Bertram's oaks and beeches. The bracken-plumes showed yellow and russet tinges here and there; brown leaves were beginning to fall on the ground-ivy that spread out a glorious carpet over the old roots; but overhead the rich canopy was as dense as ever, and the sunbeams came slipping through in narrow rays that strewed the foot-path like fragments of gold.

He was not the kind of man who goes along whistling, or smiting the bushes with

a stick. Even in solitude he was always stately ; and his mind was seldom occupied with the trifles that engage the thoughts of everyday men. He was not often amused ; he did not care for anything in the shape of a comedy. Life for him had only one aspect—the earnest and serious. He had been sent into the world to try to leave it better than he found it. Wealth, power, and personal influence must all be used for the good of mankind ; they were merely lent to him that they may be wisely spent.

Somebody, sitting on the trunk of a felled tree, and watching him as he approached, thought that he looked like Sir Galahad in quest of the Holy Grail. He had taken off his hat, and was carrying it carelessly in his hand. The golden lights, sliding down through the leaves, brightened the crisp waves of his hair, and gleamed in the wide blue eyes, that always seemed to be looking

for some blessed vision. That grand, calm face, with the leaf-shadows flickering over it, wore the aspect of a 'just and faithful knight of God.' But there are other just and faithful knights whose features do not express the language of their souls; it is not given to all good men to look the thing that they mean.

To tell the truth, it was the outward rather than the inward beauty which had a charm for Cora Wallace; yet she liked him, too, for his unlikeness to other men. Of the crowd of gentlemanly frivollers who thronged ball-rooms, and related the latest bit of fashionable scandal, Cora had grown thoroughly weary. Their attentions bored her; their pursuits moved her to quiet scorn. If she took one of them for a husband she knew that she should sink down to the level of ordinary women, and she wanted to rise and shine.

As Lord Inglefield turned a bend in the path he saw her before him, sitting quietly on the fallen tree. She had a book on her knees, but her head was lifted, and her glorious eyes greeted him.

'I couldn't stay in the house,' she said lightly; 'everybody was going to sleep, and I never can sleep while the sun shines, so I came here.'

'This is better than a sofa on a summer day.' He seated himself by her side as he spoke. 'The hot weather does not make you languid, it seems?'

'Oh no! I am dreadfully vigorous. I believe Lady Anne thinks I should be nicer if I affected a little debility; she always looks so pleased when anybody is tired, or has a headache.'

'Perhaps she likes to play at nursing,' he said; 'small ailments are not beyond her limited powers. But just put her into a

hospital ward for ten minutes, and she would be frightened into sickness herself !'

'Poor Lady Anne !' smiled Cora. 'Who would ever think of putting her into a hospital ward ? She is only fit to sit in easy-chairs, and look matronly and comfortable. Bride says it is good to have somebody in the drawing-room who wears a cap. Lady Anne wears very nice caps, and does as well as anyone else.'

'There isn't much under the cap !' said Lord Inglefield ; 'but Lady Emily Swynford is a clever woman. The sisters are not in the least alike.'

'Yes ; Sir Bertram was wise in his choice of a chaperon for Bride.' As Cora spoke she shut her book, and began to pull a bit of bracken to pieces. 'Lady Emily has a genius for managing girls ; she makes them say and do anything she likes. It is quite wonderful !'

There was a brief pause, which would have been perfect silence but for—

‘——— that sweet doubtful din
Which droppeth from the grass and bough
Sans wind and bird—none knoweth how.’

The scent of fern and moss came up from the ivied ground beneath their feet; flickering lights, creeping lower, began to play on the rough bark of an old wood-giant near them.

‘I don’t know how she does it all,’ Cora went on. ‘It answers well enough in many cases, I suppose; but I have noticed sometimes that, when her influence is withdrawn, the girl relapses into her old state of mind. Lady Emily is very clever, but she cannot really change hearts and natures, you see.’

‘You are investing her with a kind of mesmeric power,’ said Lord Inglefield.

He spoke in a musing tone, and watched the play of the sunbeams with an absent gaze.

‘Exactly. She wills that they are to do certain things, and they do them. I don’t attempt to explain or understand it; you, of course, have studied everything.’

‘I don’t think there is anything mysterious in Lady Emily’s power,’ he said, rousing himself; ‘it is simply the influence of a very wise woman of the world over inexperienced girls. They believe thoroughly in her sagacity, and trust themselves entirely to her guidance.’

‘Oh, I think it is something more than that! She has a way of ridiculing all their poor little dreams and fancies; she makes them quite ashamed of anything in the shape of sentiment. A good match is the only thing worth thinking about; any previous attachment must be laughed to scorn.’

Lord Inglefield picked up a dry leaf, and regarded it with a thoughtful frown.

'All that sort of thing is bad,' he said gravely. 'A man does not want to marry a girl who has been laughed out of a first attachment.'

'Of course not,' Cora answered quietly. 'But men don't always know; and all men have not your exalted ideal of womanhood. Mind, I think you are right. Your ideal can never be too high for me.'

'I am glad.' He spoke with a pleased smile. 'Women set too low a value on themselves nowadays. They won't let us reverence them as we ought; they do not seem to realize how slight a thing may dim a woman's glory.'

'Ah, that was the title of your lecture!' Her eyes shone. 'I was delighted to see it in print; every word is exquisitely beautiful and true!'

'Then you have read it? And you did not think it too visionary and high-flown?'

‘No. It ought to be read by every woman in the kingdom. I believe you are destined to do great things with your pen.’

‘Do you?’ a faint glow of pleasure came into his face. ‘I have had my dreams of doing something; but I shall never accomplish much.’

‘You have already accomplished a great deal; more than you are aware of.’ Her voice was strangely rich and soft. ‘Why will you not go on and do more?’

He dropped the dead leaf and plucked a living one, fresh and green, from the ivy at his feet.

‘I was going on to do more,’ he confessed; ‘but then, you know, I fell in love.’

‘But need love be a hindrance? Ah, it is sometimes! You remind me of something I have been reading here.’

She opened her book again, and bent

over it with a deepening glow on her smooth cheek.

‘Listen. It is Andrea del Sarto—the painter—who is speaking to Lucrezia, his wife :

“ But had you—oh, with the same perfect brow,
And perfect eyes, and more than perfect mouth,
And the low voice my soul hears, as a bird
The fowler’s pipe, and follows to the snare—
Had you, with these the same, but brought a mind!
Some women do so. Had the mouth there urged
‘God and the glory! never care for gain.
The present for the future, what is that?
Live for fame, side by side with Agnolo!
Rafael is waiting: up to God, all three!
I might have done it for you.”’

There was a depth and earnestness in her mellow tones that thrilled him. He knew the poem well; but the lines came to him now with a new force and meaning.

Could it be possible (the thought flashed swiftly into his brain) that she had noticed Bride’s faint interest in his great plans?

Cora Wallace was a woman ; Bride, poor child, was a girl still, a loving, trusting, timid girl. It would take years of training to bring her thoughts into perfect unison with his own ; and that training-work would be very sweet. Yes ; but it was a work that would steal his time from the nobler, larger labour that he had set himself to do.

Some men never have any doubts about their capabilities. Lord Inglefield had none ; and yet he had lived a good many years in the world without achieving anything worthy of record. He had written some poems, painted some pictures, delivered a few lectures ; and poems, pictures, and lectures were praised a little for their own merits, a great deal for the sake of his rank. The title has not yet lost its charm. And now he was busily devising schemes for the amusement and instruction

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of the working-classes, and believed earnestly and devoutly in his mission. Out of those very working-classes had arisen voices that drowned his feeble tones, as the organ drowns the shepherd's pipe. But he thought himself a leading voice for all that.

Andrea del Sarto had put a new fear into his mind. What if his career should be dwarfed and stunted by the possession of a fair wife? How could he expect Bride's soul to climb the lofty heights that he had gained? He supposed there were but few women in the world who were capable of following him. And then he turned, and met Cora's inquiring gaze.

'Well,' he said, with a resigned smile, 'the painter made his choice. And having made the choice, one must be content to abide by it.'



CHAPTER VII.

‘FAREWELL THE TRANQUIL MIND ! FAREWELL
CONTENT !’

CORA sighed, and was silent. Lord
Inglefield flung away the ivy-
leaf and rose to his feet.

‘We have got through the afternoon very pleasantly,’ he said. ‘Do you know it is half-past four ? They will be drinking tea without you.’

‘I don’t want to miss my cup of tea,’ she answered, rising too. ‘I shall go back now.’

‘And I will walk with you as far as the

shrubberies. The path is lonely; I think you should not come here without a companion.'

'Oh, I'm not troubled with fears. But Bride doesn't venture into the park without Jove. She is wiser than I.'

They walked on through golden lights and shifting shadows; and light and shade fell on two grave faces. Cora's rich bloom had paled a little; there was an anxious look in her eyes. Lord Inglefield glanced at her once or twice without speaking. He broke the silence somewhat abruptly at last.

'What do you think of Bride's health?' he asked.

She hesitated for a moment.

'Oh, I don't think there's any cause for alarm.' She spoke hurriedly. 'We must remember that this is a trying time for her.'

‘She gets nervous,’ he said. ‘There is quite a frightened look in her eyes sometimes. Poor child, she need not fear! I shall bear all the burdens.’

‘For your sake I wish she were stronger.’ There was no fright in the eyes that met his now; they were clear and sad. ‘I wish she could be all that you want. If she would only give up brooding and fretting, there would be more hope.’

‘Brooding and fretting about the future?’ He sighed. ‘Yes, I know she is terribly afraid of her new duties.’

‘Do you think so? Now I fancy that she is fretting about the past. It isn’t the future that troubles her.’

‘But her past is simply a blank. She never saw anything of life till they took her up to town last season. You forget that she was fresh from a quiet village that nobody knows.’

'No, I don't forget. I have lived in that quiet village,' said Cora calmly.

'Ah yes. She has often talked of your friendship. You know how dull and grey her life must have been. There is nothing in Seacastle to regret.'

'To regret? Oh no; she was only too glad to go away. And I was unfeignedly thankful to hear that Sir Bertram had claimed her. Poor girl! you can imagine how sadly she needed a father's care.'

'But she was living with an uncle and aunt,' said Lord Inglefield musingly. 'I remember the cottage well. You recollect that carriage accident, of course?'

'Perfectly.'

'I carried her into the little house, and the old couple were dreadfully scared. She wasn't unhappy with them. They were good people, I believe.'

'Very good people, but too simple to

have the care of a young girl,' said Cora gravely. 'I don't think they ever realized how beautiful she was. There was a great deal of spite in that wretched little place. All the women envied her.'

'Yes,' he answered, 'I can understand that. Beauty always makes enemies.'

'And after that miserable adventure on the island, you can fancy what bitter things they said.' Cora spoke in a low sad voice. 'Poor darling Bride, how she clung to me in those days! It was a dreary time after Captain Ashburn was gone. She had to bear a great many humiliations, I am afraid.'

'What was the adventure? Where was the island? Who was Captain Ashburn?'

The rich colour faded out of Cora's cheeks and lips, but her eyes were intensely bright.

He had come to a sudden stop in the

path, and stood looking her full in the face. He was amazed, shocked, bewildered ; but as he stood with his brows knit, and his eyes questioning her, he looked like the hero of a tragedy, beautiful and stern. It might have been a scene from a play, with the grand old trees for a background, and the dark-haired woman standing mute before that proud man.

‘Why do you ask about these things?’ she faltered at last. ‘Of course you have been told everything.’

‘What is everything?’ He was the very incarnation of righteous wrath, quiet and self-restrained, speaking in measured tones that made her tremble. ‘Don’t you know that you have either said too little or too much?’

There was a brief silence, while she nerved herself to reply.

A squirrel peered inquisitively at them

from the boughs overhead ; a magpie, with his head cocked on one side, seemed waiting to hear what came next. But there was no sound loud enough to break the stillness.

‘I have said too much,’ she sighed. ‘But how was I to know that you hadn’t been told ? How could I think that she would keep it from you ?’

‘I don’t blame you,’ he answered, with perfect calmness. ‘But you must go on now.’

‘It is very hard to go on. She is my friend.’

‘You cannot serve her now by being silent,’ he said coldly.

‘No.’ There was a little quaver in her voice that touched him. ‘But you mustn’t be hard upon her. She was only a girl, and did not know anything of the world.’

‘Was it long ago ?’ he asked.

'A year ago last May. Captain Ashburn came to Seacastle on a visit to his aunt. You know the kind of man well enough—lazy, frivolous, encumbered with debts—but not devoid of some real feeling. Oh, I know he acted inexcusably, but he did what any other man of his stamp would have done!'

'He made love to her, I suppose?'

'Yes, in an aimless fashion. They both knew that it could come to nothing. But they dreamed away long hours together day after day, and people talked as they always will.'

'Yes?'

'I wish you would not make me go on!' she said suddenly. 'Why can't you let her tell you the rest?'

'Later on she shall tell me. But I must hear all that you have to say.'

He spoke in a gentler tone. But the

gentleness was all for her, not for Bride.

‘ Well, there came a certain May evening when they were together on the shore. They didn’t stop to think, I suppose. There was a boat, and they got into it; and he rowed her away to a lonely little island where not a soul was to be found. They meant to come back, you know, before it got dark.’

He was silent; and there was something terrible in the calm of his face.

‘ They landed, and made the boat fast—as they thought. But it wasn’t fast. It broke loose, and drifted away. And they had to stay all night upon the island.’

Her task was ended now. She drew a deep breath of relief, and began to move slowly onward. She had obeyed his command and told all that there was to tell; but she had not got through her story without

pain. Her cheeks were still pale, her eyes weary. She walked listlessly and slowly as if she were tired, and sick at heart.

He, too, began to move onward, with a burning anger in his soul. He had been tricked, blinded, cheated by a girl in her first season. Never for a moment had he thought that another had won the first place in her heart. That clinging tenderness, that implicit faith in his goodness had seemed to him the sweet proof of a virgin love. He saw it all now in a new light. The coyness had been deceit; the timidity a cloak to cover a guilty conscience. He recalled the memory of the woman who had deceived him in his younger days, and spoiled the earlier part of his life. Good heaven! what had he to do with women? What was there in him that made them always false to him?

A sigh broke gently in upon his musings;



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Cora's skirts were rustling softly by his side. And then he looked down into her beautiful sad face, and felt that she was suffering.

'I am sorry for you,' he said. 'You are attached to her. And you would have shielded her if you could.'

'That is just what she will never believe,' Cora answered mournfully. 'She will think I am her enemy.'

'Her enemy! The best friend she has ever had. But for you I might have gone blindfold into marriage. Do you think I could ever have forgiven her if I had heard this story after she became my wife?'

'No,' said Cora. 'Secrets between married people are fearful things. But you can forgive her now?'

'Yes, I can forgive her now.' His voice was very quiet. Cora's heart was throbbing loud and fast.

‘ You will talk over the matter with her ?
She will tell you how wretched she has
been. And then there will be a perfect
understanding between you ?’

‘ Yes, a perfect understanding,’ he
answered, still in the same quiet tone.

She looked up quickly into that studiously calm face. Her work was done. There was no need of words to tell her that Bride and Lord Inglefield were sundered for ever.

They had come to a gate in the fence that divided the shrubberies from the park. Right in front of them rose the great red house, with terraces, lawns, and gardens bathed in afternoon sunshine. It looked as sunny and still as that enchanted palace where the princess slept out a hundred years. But to Bride, asleep in the dim library, there would come another kind of awaking. Not for her would be the prince’s

kiss ; there was a cold and changed heart awaiting her outside the world of dreams. And Cora lingered for a moment, hardly knowing how she should face her friend.



CHAPTER VIII.

‘IT IS NOT WORTH THE KEEPING ; LET
IT GO.’

IT was drawing near sunset. The hot earth was cooled by the soft west wind. Bride had had her afternoon sleep out, and had dressed for dinner. Afterwards she had returned to the library, knowing that Lord Inglefield would come to seek her there.

‘She felt as if her weary days and troubled nights were done. Her mind was made up at last. She meant to tell him

all the poor little story of her first love. She was prepared even to confess that she had lately returned to the old dreams and longings. It would be a difficult task, but how much easier to confess to him than to a man of smaller soul ! His very greatness and goodness would make him pitiful.

If she must meet Victor Ashburn again, she would meet him with a clear conscience. With her husband by her side, knowing everything, she could face her first lover bravely. She would be true, perfectly true, whatever it cost her.

The evening sunshine filled the dim old room with its glow. She stood by the open window, looking out across the lawn, where the low light made a golden mist. The summer gardens, thus glorified, had a look of fairy-land ; flowers glistened and glowed like gems ; leaves and stems were gilded. As she stood there, looking and

thinking, the door opened, and Lord Inglefield came in.

She turned and met him with a brightening face. But the brightness faded before his first glance, and she stood still, a few paces from him, questioning him with her eyes.

'Are you angry, Alfred?' she asked at last.

'More pained than angry,' he said coldly. 'Why were you not open with me, Bride? You might have known that I should hear all, sooner or later.'

She was very pale, paler than he had ever seen her yet.

'There wasn't much to tell,' she said. 'You are speaking of the Seacastle days, and that luckless adventure of mine. Indeed, Alfred, I meant to tell you everything this very evening.'

'Was it fair to put it off till this even-

ing ? Wouldn't it have been fairer to have told me last May ?'

She looked up at him earnestly. He stood like a statue, with his stern eyes fixed upon her.

'Yes,' she said with a sigh, 'I think it would ; I see now that it would. But I didn't see it then ; the past seemed so very far away. And I had never been engaged to marry—any other man. He went to India—did you hear that ?'

'I have heard all. It was a painful story. Of course I can make some allowance for your inexperience. Yet, Bride, a girl's instinct ought to be her safeguard.'

'I was foolish,' she said meekly. 'But it was so pleasant being with him. And I had been very lonely.'

There were tears in her eyes, and her lips quivered. Her thoughts had gone back to the simple, wilful girl who had

learnt her first love-lesson from the lips of a wandering soldier. Ah, why is it that such lessons are often remembered when the lore of later years is forgotten? And yet sometimes the teacher is the first to bid the scholar forget.

'I loved to think of your loneliness,' said Lord Inglefield. 'I had pictured you growing up in sweet solitude with those two old guardians. I believed I had found a girl who was verily unspotted from the world.'

'And I have disappointed you,' she sighed. 'Oh, Alfred, is there nothing that I can do?'

'Nothing. How can you restore the lost freshness? Don't you see that you have no power?'

She turned away from him with a sob. He was so good, so noble; and she had deceived him, and wrung his heart. Never,

perhaps, had he been so dear to her as he was at this moment; never had she so passionately desired to rise to the level of his high ideal. He had always seemed perfection in her eyes—a saint, lifted far above the ordinary faults and follies of mankind. No sacrifice could be too great, she thought, to atone for the pain she had caused. To spend a lifetime with an indignant and wounded saint was scarcely a cheerful prospect. But she was willing to face it, willing to do anything that might heal the hurt he had sustained.

‘I don’t think any woman in the world is good enough for you,’ she said. ‘I was always afraid of not being all that you wanted. But life is long, isn’t it? And I thought that I might learn, and improve.’

He shook his head sadly.

‘Don’t you think it is possible?’ she

asked. 'I mean to give up all my foolish dreaming ways. I mean to shape my life according to your will. And in the time to come——'

'Don't talk about the time to come.' He lifted his hand solemnly. 'We must part here, and part for ever.'

It was a parting of which she had never even dreamed. In spite of all her misgivings about herself, in spite of wayward thoughts that had gone straying into the past, she had never believed that the bond could be broken. She had been too sure of his devotion to anticipate the shadow of a change, and a thousand times she had blamed herself for not giving her love as lavishly as he had given his.

And now, why were they to part? What dreadful thing had she done, that he should cast her from him? Her tears were suddenly stayed, the colour came back into

her lips and cheeks. She lifted her eyes dauntlessly to his.

‘Alfred,’ she said calmly, ‘are you in earnest? Do you truly mean the thing that you say?’

‘I do mean it,’ he answered. ‘How would it be possible for us to live together? Yesterday I thought you as innocent and true as an angel. To-day——’

‘Do you dare to tell me that I am not innocent?’

Her look and tone startled him. She stood before him like an angry queen, her blue eyes flashing, her delicate cheek flushed. A minute ago she had been a meek timid girl, pleading with him to pardon her folly. Now she was a haughty woman, all her pride up in arms, all her humility forgotten.

‘No,’ he said, quailing a little before that proud gaze. ‘No, you cannot think

so, Bride. But I have been deceived right and left. Do you not remember what I said about "a woman's glory"? Well, I cling to my ideal, and I cannot part with it.'

'You do right to cling to it,' she answered coldly. 'Let Ixion have his cloud.'

'You think me harsh.' He spoke sadly. 'You don't know what I suffer in letting you go.'

'Better such suffering now, than repentance later on,' she said. 'You are right. It would not be possible for us to live together. You would be kind, I dare say; but I should always read distrust in your eyes.'

'And Sir Bertram—and the world?' he asked, with trouble in his face.

'Ah yes, Sir Bertram and the world. Am I to tell everybody that you have thrown me over?'

‘No, no. Let them think that you have changed your mind. Say anything that seems best.’

‘I shall tell my father the truth,’ she said proudly. ‘As for the world, let it say what it will. And now, Lord Inglefield, good-bye.’

‘Good-bye,’ he said, holding out his hand.

She took it frankly. Her eyes softened.

‘Good-bye,’ she repeated. ‘This is all for the best; I shall be at rest, now that it is over. If I had married you I would have been your true and faithful wife. But oh, how hard I should have striven to rise to your ideal! My life would have been one long strain.’

He bowed his head in silence, and stepped out through the open window upon
• the terrace. She stood and watched him go away into the golden mist of the sunset;

and then the shrubberies hid him from her sight. Well, it was all over, and she was free to begin her life again. But first there would be a hard ordeal to pass through. Everybody would know it to-morrow ; there would be smiles and head-shakings over the fine match that had come to nothing. There had been a great slip between cup and lip, they would say ; such things did happen sometimes in spite of clever chaperons and well-laid schemes. And Sir Bertram, how would he receive her news ?

Turning slowly away from the window, she crossed the room and opened the door. There seemed to be an unwonted commotion going on in the house, a sound of many voices and footsteps echoed through the long corridor. What did it all mean ? She paused to think and listen. And in the next minute Lady Anne Waring came hastening towards her.



CHAPTER IX.

FORGIVEN.

Poor Lady Anne was not, after all, so useless as had been supposed. She was less fluttered, too, than many a stronger woman would have been. The wintry pink that time had left upon her cheeks had all faded; her lips quivered as she spoke. But she had promptly sent a messenger for the doctor, and had seen Sir Bertram carried at once to his room.

‘I knew it was a stroke of paralysis, my

dear,' she said, taking Bride's cold hands in hers. 'I am very stupid, they say, but I had suspected that something was going to happen to him. And it did happen, very suddenly.'

'Where is Hannah? Does she know?' Bride asked, trembling.

'Hannah is with him. She begged me to come to you, and tell you not to go to his room yet. Oh, how you are shaking, poor child! I thought Lord Inglefield was here.'

'He has just gone,' said Bride, putting her hand to her forehead, and looking round her with bewildered eyes.

Had he indeed just gone? or was it a month ago that he said good-bye, and stepped out through the open window? While they were saying their parting words, Sir Bertram had been stricken.

'Shall we send after him, dear, and

bring him back?' asked Lady Anne innocently. 'He could comfort you better than anyone else.'

'No, you mustn't send for him.' Bride collected herself and spoke quietly. 'It will be best not, dear Lady Anne. And I shan't be alone. You will stay?'

'Stay with you? Yes, poor child, indeed I will,' said the little old lady kindly. 'The other people will go away, of course.'

'Yes, yes; let them all go,' said Bride.

At last the summer night closed in over the great house, where the master lay stricken for death. All the guests were gone save Miss Wallace and Lady Anne Waring. Bride, sitting upstairs in her room, had heard the carriages driving away. There had been no ceremony of leavetakings; the grim visitant who had stalked so suddenly into the hall had put an end to forms and courtesies. And

Bride, in her pain and trouble, desired nothing so much as solitude.

It was nearly ten o'clock. She had sent her maid away, and was sitting in her dressing-gown, with hair hanging loose over her shoulders, unwilling to go to bed. There was a doctor in the sick-chamber, watching with Hannah and the nurse. Her presence was not wanted there; they would not let her enter the room. Did anybody want her? she wondered bitterly. ' Lover and friend hast Thou put far from me ' (how the old words haunted her!) ' and hid mine acquaintance out of my sight.'

The night was warm and very still. As she sat musing and listening a light foot-step came swiftly along the corridor, and paused outside her door. There was a gentle knock. It was only Jones come back, she thought.

But it was not Jones who entered. She

glanced up wearily as the door opened, and saw Cora Wallace looking at her with sorrowful eyes.

‘Why are you here, Cora?’ she asked. ‘Didn’t they tell you I wanted to be alone?’

Her tone was haughty and cold; but Cora was not to be driven away. She came nearer, and knelt down by Bride’s chair.

‘I’ll go presently,’ she said. ‘Let me talk to you just for a little while—only a little while. I shall leave the house to-morrow morning. Let me have half an hour with you to-night.’

‘Better not.’ Bride spoke in a tired voice. ‘You have come to make excuses, I know. But you might have spared yourself the trouble. Lord Inglefield and I have parted; we should have parted, I believe, if you had had nothing to say. So

the blame doesn't rest entirely with you.'

'The blame does rest with me,' said Cora firmly. 'I don't think he would have heard anything if I hadn't told him. No excuse is possible. I have done a mean thing, and I know it.'

This was not quite the line which Bride had expected her to take. She was silent, and the other went on.

'You don't know what it feels like to be mean. Be thankful for that. I was never mean until to-day. I've done wrong things before, of course ; but wrong things are not always mean things. It is the first time that I have ever really despised myself.'

'A very interesting confession,' Bride said coldly. 'But unfortunately I'm not in the mood to hear it. You have to travel to-morrow. Why not go and get some sleep ?'

Cora smiled—a bitter little smile.

‘There isn’t much spirit left in me, is there?’ she said. ‘I shouldn’t be kneeling here if I respected myself. But if you were to strike me I wouldn’t go away. There are things that I must say to-night.’

‘This is indeed a self-imposed penance,’ said Bride. ‘What a pity our chapel exists no longer! You might have knelt upon the cold stones, and got somebody to scourge you. Jones would have done it, I think, for a small remuneration.’

Cora looked at her fixedly. ‘Ah,’ she sighed, ‘you may think more kindly of me one day. Or you may not. Anyhow, you will not forget the words that I am going to speak.’

Bride leaned back in her chair with eyes closed. She was tired of Cora and her confessions, tired of life, tired of everything.

The taper-light shone on her pale face,

set in masses of bright hair, and Cora thought it looked almost like the face of a dead girl. On the dressing-table lay a bunch of myrtle which Bride had gathered and worn that day. It was a flower that Lord Inglefield liked, and it had been worn, Cora knew, to please his eye. She took it up and held it clasped in her fingers while she spoke again.

‘I love him, Bride.’ Her voice suddenly broke the silence that had fallen on them both. ‘I loved him before you ever saw him. And I have never loved anyone else in all my life.’

Bride opened her eyes and raised herself. The listlessness was gone. There was a ring of truth in Cora’s words that had reached her heart at last.

‘I met him in Róme, nearly two years ago,’ Cora went on. ‘We didn’t get very intimate; I was summoned away, and

there wasn't time for an acquaintance to ripen. Isn't it cruel when the opportunity is denied? The fates were dead against me after that; I was always missing him!

Her breath came quickly. She paused for a moment with parted lips and burning cheeks.

'Last summer, when I left Seacastle only for a few days, that accident happened. You remember, Bride? I came back to hear of his sudden appearance. He had vanished, of course; it was always the same. And at last, when we *did* meet again, I found him engaged to you.'

'Don't go on,' Bride said pityingly. 'I am sorry for you now. I did not suspect this.'

'Didn't you suspect that I was trying to win him from you to-day? It was my last throw. I staked everything upon it—honour, self-respect, everything!'

‘I did think that you wanted to win him, Cora. How could I think otherwise? I knew that he could have heard that story from no one else. But—I didn’t guess that you really loved him.’

‘No. You thought I was scheming for the title. Oh, it wasn’t that; it was for the man! I couldn’t have been so low, and horrid, and mean for anything else!’

Again there was silence. A time-piece ticked loudly; its hands pointed to twenty minutes past ten. Cora’s half-hour had nearly expired.

‘You would not have been happy with him, Bride,’ she said more calmly; ‘I saw that you gave him but half a heart. Oh, child, there can only be great patience where there is great love! His wife will need patience. He is one of those men whose plans will come to nothing: he will be always devising, and always failing, yet

unconscious of failure. You would have got terribly tired of it all !

‘I did get tired of it,’ Bride answered, with a faint smile; ‘he was so full of dreams. There was a fear, deep down in my soul, that we were not made for each other. I used to think it was because I wasn’t good enough that the fear came.’

‘No—no ; it was because you didn’t love enough ! Is there any kind of fear that a perfect love cannot cast out ? True love is never bored, nor disgusted, nor deceived ; it takes a man just as he is, and knows his weakness far better than he knows it himself. It foresees the inevitable failure, and is ready to console.’

‘I couldn’t have loved him like that,’ said Bride thoughtfully — ‘never ; not if we had lived together for a hundred years !’

‘He would have wearied you ; and just

when you were feeling unutterably bored your first lover would have crossed your path again. Oh, I know how these things come to pass; I have watched them often enough! Don't you see what might have been?

'Hush!'—Bride lifted up her hands and let them fall—'it is too dreadful to think about to-night!'

She felt like one who recoils from a half-seen abyss. It did verily seem to her that she had caught a momentary glimpse of the hidden path; and it made her feel as if she should walk with timid steps for many a day to come.

'I am going now,' said Cora, rising. 'You won't see me any more, I shall leave early to-morrow morning; but I couldn't go without asking for your forgiveness first. It is very little use to ask, I think; you never can forgive me!'

‘Yes, I can ; the bitterness is all gone. Good-bye, Cora ! God help you !’

‘I believe any other woman would have cursed me !’ Cora said, with a sob.

They kissed each other without speaking another word. Then the door opened and closed softly, and Bride was alone once more.



CHAPTER X.

AMONG THE SUNFLOWERS.

THERE was only one unoccupied house in Brackenhurst—and, like all houses that have been long empty, it had got a bad name. People said that it was unwholesome and damp, and there had even been a vague hint of a ghost. It was, in truth, a somewhat uncanny-looking place, heavily built of grey stone, with little diamond-paned casements imbedded in its massive walls. There were only two storeys: all the rooms were dark and low,

so low that a tall person could not enter them without stooping; but the cottage stood in the midst of a beautiful old garden, where old-fashioned flowers wasted their sweetness, and crowds of roses bloomed their lives away. That garden always attracted Kate and Muriel when they passed it in their walks. It was protected merely by a low wall of flints, which Mew could have scrambled over with perfect ease. She was sorely tempted to steal the flowers, and only the most earnest entreaties availed to restrain her.

One day workmen were seen to be busy about Stone Cottage. A lady was coming there, they said; and all preparations must be made without delay. Granny shook her head over their hasty doings, and declared that it would take a month to put the place into complete repair.

The new tenant arrived just when August

was drawing to a close. She brought with her an elderly lady, and two staid women-servants; and all four were dressed in the deepest mourning.

Kate Ryan had her first glimpse of the new-comer one evening as she passed by the garden wall. A woman, dressed richly in black, was walking slowly along the path. The low sun shone on her golden head, and lit up the face that was turned, just for one moment, towards the Vicar's daughter. It was a sullen face, strikingly handsome. The girl fancied that there was a malignant gleam in the dark-blue eyes, and hastened her steps homeward.

'I don't like that strange lady,' she said to Mrs. Hay. 'I wish she hadn't come here. She looks as if she means to do evil.'

'Kate, I am really ashamed of you!' said Granny, with severity. 'You have been

reading too many novels lately, and they have unsettled your mind. That poor woman is a widow—a Mrs. Heatherstone ; her husband died suddenly last spring. She has come here to be in perfect retirement. We must call, of course.'

Kate answered with a little grimace, expressive of reluctance ; but the call was made, and they were received by Mrs. Heatherstone's elderly companion. Mrs. Heatherstone, she explained, was not well enough to see visitors.

' She didn't look a bit ill,' said Kate, as they walked away from the house.

But the tenant of Stone Cottage was quite forgotten when Captain Ludlow arrived at the Vicarage. He came unexpectedly, and Kate had no thoughts to spare for anyone else. They were to be married in October. Already the quiet work of preparation was going on, and Granny was busy

with her needle. There was so much to be done, she said ; and Kate was so volatile, poor child, that she could not be trusted with anything.

From morning till evening the lovers were together. Maud Heatherstone, sitting alone in her dark room, saw them pass her window twice or thrice a day. She kept much indoors, scarcely ever going beyond the limits of her garden, and speaking very little to her attendants. Maud had never been a great talker ; it was always a way of hers to sit and brood over her plans in silence. Mrs. Fancourt, her companion, was deaf. Her servants were utter strangers to the village folk, and could be trusted not to make acquaintances. She had guarded herself securely against gossip and intrusion, and was waiting in sullen patience. Waiting for what ? She scarcely knew ; but she never ceased to watch and wait.

One evening her chance came. Kate, as delicate as a blossom or a butterfly, was sometimes the victim of a nervous headache. On these occasions Granny laid violent hands upon her, and bore her off to bed; and Sidney saw her no more till morning. Her foe attacked her one day, and was fought with resolutely till five o'clock. And then, even Captain Ludlow admitted that she was not fit to take her place at the tea-table.

She went away to her room with a rueful face, and he wondered how he should get through the evening without her. The Vicar was absent; Mew had crept upstairs after the invalid; and Granny, having poured out tea, excused herself and vanished. Sidney lounged about the drawing-room, and tried to read. And then, just as the church clock was striking six, he flung the book aside and strolled out of doors.

Sauntering down a lane, he lit a cigar, and came to the conclusion that there would be a thunderstorm. The air was hot and still. Heavy masses of cloud began to purple the west, taking a red copper-like tinge here and there. Farm-yard sounds and bird-notes were silent. The hush was intense; not a breeze stirred, not a leaf rustled. He pushed his hat back from his forehead, and sighed for a breath of wind.

Unexpected thoughts began to spring up in his brain in the stillness. Where was he last August? Memories came trooping back; he recalled the yellow wheat-fields and blue sea-water; the fiery bays and the dusty white road that led to Seacastle. And then that last glimpse of Maud Heatherstone, furtively straightening her bonnet, and trying to atone for her bad temper by giving him a parting smile.

He had never gone to Fairwood. Even if there had been no scene between them, he could not have kept his promise to Maud. Only a few weeks after that luckless drive, he had been summoned to the death-bed of a relation, and had found himself heir to a modest fortune. Then came law business, and divers wearisome matters connected with his new possessions. And then the first journey to Brackenhurst, and the meeting with Kate Ryan.

He had heard of poor Robert Heatherstone's death when his heart was full of his new love.* It did not even occur to him to wonder how Maud would receive the news of his engagement. He had drifted miles and miles away from her since their last interview. Kate, sweet sunny Kate, was everything to him nowadays; and under her influence his life was growing purer and calmer. He wished

that she had not been so delicate a blossom—poor child! The Vicar had told him a sad story of her mother's sudden death. And Kate, in the rapidly changing tints of her flower-like face, betrayed that oversensitiveness which sometimes betokens a swift ending.

A sudden turn in the lane brought him into a new atmosphere. The fragrance of jessamine, sweet, rich, overpowering, loaded the still air.

‘I must be near a garden,’ he thought.

He found himself close to a low flint wall enclosing a gay wilderness of flowers. And then he remembered that he had seen this place in his walks with Kate; but somehow its wild sweetness had never charmed him as it did this evening.

It was utterly unlike the old Vicarage garden, always formal and trim. Granny gloried in the high yew hedge, which never

seemed to have a twig out of place. And Kate took pride in the smooth gravelled paths with their stiff box-bordering, shut in by those thick walls of green. But Sidney thought them a little too precise, and said he always felt as if he ought to be dressed like Sir Peter Teazle, when he walked there. He stood looking across the low wall with infinite satisfaction. There was a kind of lawless beauty here, which caught his fancy.

He was fascinated by the deep gold of great sunflowers, towering above a tangle of large daisies, that seemed to mimic their stately forms. Gillyflowers, white bell-flowers, passion-flowers, and foxgloves, were all blended in delightful confusion. Fuchsia trees were hung with tassels of coral; but the jessamine seemed to reign supreme over all, filling up every corner with white stars and feathery foliage. He idly gathered a

spray from a mass that trailed over the wall.

‘ Sidney,’ called a contralto voice, coming from the midst of the flowers.

He started, and flung away his cigar.

‘ You didn’t expect to find me here,’ said the voice, half mournfully. And then a woman in a black gown came into view among the sunflowers.

The dead black silk fitted closely to the full bust ; there was nothing but a crape frill round the massive white throat. But never had Maud Heatherstone looked so handsome. Her golden hair shone in the evening light ; lips and cheeks glowed with the richest crimson ; the dark-blue eyes were intensely bright. For a moment Sidney was stricken mute. This beautiful vision, appearing so suddenly in the wild garden, seemed hardly to belong to the everyday world at all.

‘No,’ he said at last. ‘Who could have expected to find you in such a strange, lonely place?’

‘All places are alike to me now,’ she sighed. ‘No, not quite; I couldn’t bear to stay at Fairwood. So I let the house and wandered about for a time. And then I heard of this cottage.’

‘But it is far too small and poor for you?’

‘I like it. The rooms are dark and low, but that doesn’t matter; I see no visitors. And I’m fond of this neglected old garden.’

‘It is charming,’ he said. ‘A sort of enchanted wilderness, full of colour and perfume.’

‘Ah, I’m glad that you like it too! You know I always had a disorderly fancy. I never did care much for my own well-kept grounds; they belonged more to the gardener than to me.’

‘I can imagine that,’ said Captain Ludlow.

‘Come in, and stroll in my wilderness. You can’t possibly realize its charms on the other side of the wall. Do come, Sidney,’ she added softly. ‘I have a thousand things to say to you.’

He could not say her nay. Moreover there was something pleasant and romantic in this unexpected meeting, and he had been feeling dull and bored. In another moment he had opened a rusty little iron gate, and they were standing among the sunflowers together.

‘One can walk here unseen,’ she said, as they paced along a grassy path. ‘I have caught a glimpse of you, once or twice, through my screen of shrubs and flowers. But I was completely hidden.’

A faint glow came into his brown cheek, and there was a brief silence. The west

was turning crimson—a lurid splendour began to redden the slope of a newly reaped field ; but the light was too intense, too fiery. Maud looked away from the sunset with a sigh.

‘ I wonder how many more times I shall have to see the sun go down ! ’ she said wearily. ‘ Length of days is supposed to be a blessing, isn’t it ? I think I’ve heard good people say so. ’

‘ You have everything that makes a long life desirable, ’ he answered.

‘ How can you tell ? Is your heart so full of bliss that you can’t believe in another’s emptiness ? ’

She spoke softly, but with some bitterness in her tone. He was touched, although he knew the trick.

‘ I know you have had a great loss, ’ he said gently. ‘ But you are young, and by-and-by you will find some new joy. ’

‘I don’t want any new joys!’ It was the old wilful Maud who was speaking now. ‘I hate everything that’s new. New scenes, new friends, new loves—they are all intolerable! The things that I prized most were snatched away, just when I was beginning to learn their value. And I want them back again.’

He was troubled—shaken. The passionate contralto voice was waking up an old echo unawares. He looked at the glowing face and ripe lips, and then turned away quickly to pull off a jessamine-spray. She noted the restless hands and averted head, and knew that he was ill at ease.

‘This mood will pass away,’ he said, trying to speak in a dry matter-of-fact voice. ‘Naturally you are feeling lonely and sad, and you get morbid in this dull place.’

‘Perhaps I am morbid,’ she said, with

curious meekness. 'I'm very wicked, I know. I never was good and calm and saintly, you see. I don't know how to talk to poor people, and visit the sick. If I tried, I should make terrible mistakes.'

'You never have tried, I think. That kind of work may be easier than you imagine. You might get comfort out of it. Many women do.'

'Not women of my stamp.' There was the old dangerous gleam beneath her eyelashes. 'We can't find our consolations in soup-kitchens and mothers' meetings. Even church-services are of little avail, and curates are apt to irritate rather than soothe. I couldn't embroider a stole to save my life. But I *could* work a scarf for my true love to wear over his armour. And, better still, I could don a page's suit, and follow him to the field;—ay, and thrust

myself a hundred times between him and death !'

So she spoke, the handsome daring woman, her broad chest heaving, her eyes shining. It was no marvel if his pulses quickened as he listened, and looked in her face.

'But we are in the nineteenth century,' he said, still trying to talk common-sense, 'We don't want our ladies to be pages nowadays.'

'No. Then what is there left for women like me to do? Can you answer me?'

'I cannot,' he said gravely. 'Perhaps a better man could. I never was a wise counsellor.'

She lifted her eyes to his with a wistful glance.

'Ah, Sidney,' she sighed, 'you are wiser than you used to be! I only wish you

would teach me your wisdom. I should suffer less if you could.'

'Don't talk so, Maud!' A dark flush rose to his face, and he spoke in a hurried tone. 'You will begin a new life, and—and be useful and happy, I hope!'

'Useful and happy!' she echoed mockingly. 'Has the parson's daughter taught you to talk like that? It sounds like a bit out of a sermon. But that isn't the way to heal a sore heart, Sidney. And mine is very sore.'

The flushed cheeks were wet with tears, the full scarlet lips quivered piteously. What could he say or do? In a man's helpless fashion he stood and looked at her for a moment. And then he drew a step nearer, and laid a hand gently on her shoulder.

'Don't cry, Maud,' he pleaded. 'I know I have a clumsy way of putting things.

There are some wounds that only time can heal—and patience. You mustn't think me heartless if I say—be patient.'

'Oh, I know,' she said meekly. 'But, Sidney, you don't realize how hard it is! Men never do. To see you with *her*!'

'Hush!' he said, and the hand was withdrawn. 'We won't talk of that. I hoped the old feeling was dead and buried. Why do you stay here, Maud? You would be far happier elsewhere.'

'I am going,' she answered. 'But I can't forget as you can. You want to banish me from your sight? That's the way with you men. You never cherish the least tenderness for an old love. Men are born without memories, I believe. It's better so—memory is only another word for misery.'

'Maud, you are saying hard things!'
There was a slight quiver in his voice. 'If

I want you to go away, it is for your own good.'

'I am going,' she repeated. 'I will start next week if you like. I know I ought not to stay here now. And I'd do anything rather than pain you.'

He sighed. She saw that her submissiveness moved him deeply.

'This is Wednesday,' he said thoughtfully. 'I shall leave the Vicarage on Friday. And I don't think I shall come back till——'

'Till the wedding?' She drew her breath quickly. 'Oh, I won't wait till that comes to pass! You will find me gone when you return. And I will never cross your path again if I can help it—never.'

'If we could only meet as old friends,' he was beginning to say. But the words died upon his lips. It was so plain that there never could be any ordinary friendli-

ness between this woman and himself. She still had the power to set all his pulses throbbing wildly ; there was danger in her presence. Yet he could not be hard and cruel. She had more heart than he had thought, this poor stormy, fiery Maud ! And in her own way she really was trying to school herself, and be docile and meek.

He took her hand in his (that firm white hand whose touch he had known so well of old), and looked down at her with a troubled gaze.

‘ God help you, Maud ! ’ he said. ‘ I am sorely distressed about you. It seems terribly brutal to have told you to go. But what is there that I can do ? ’

‘ Not much, ’ she answered quietly. ‘ I had my chance of happiness years ago, and I let it slip. The chance doesn’t come twice in a lifetime. But I should like to see

you again, just once more, before I say good-bye for ever.'

'Ah, Maud, it will be better not!' he sighed.

'Well, it shall all be as you will,' she said, in a tone of submission. 'But, oh, Sidney, be good to me! It's such a little thing to ask, isn't it? And it would comfort me so—afterwards.'

He stood irresolute, longing to yield, and yet fearing for her and himself.'

'Couldn't it be managed?' she went on. 'Do you leave early on Friday?'

'I have arranged to go at ten minutes past two. It would be difficult, Maud, to plan another meeting. Yet—if it would make you happier——'

'Oh, it would—it would! And it's the last time I shall ever ask you anything—the very last. There's another train two hours later, you know.'

‘Yes.’

‘Can’t you drive to meet the train you fixed on, and then come back? You have only to wait till the chaise has gone home; and then you can take a short cut across that field. There is no need to be seen in the open road at all; the fields are quite deserted now, and it is easy enough to climb this little wall without going round into the lane.’

The garden was completely enclosed by the low wall, which divided it from the lane on one side, and from the field on the other. As Maud had said, it was easy enough to cross that newly-reaped field, and scale the wall, without fear of being seen by anyone walking in the lane. But Captain Ludlow shrank from the proposal. The better part of him revolted against the deception. No, he could not do it, he thought. And yet—poor Maud!’

‘It would be acting a lie,’ he said.

‘Would it?’ she asked innocently. ‘It doesn’t seem so bad as that. Oh, Sidney, won’t you do it for my sake?’

Their hands were still clasped. A thrill ran through him as her fingers softly pressed his. He thought of his earlier days, and the passionate love that he had once poured out on Maud Collington. It seemed to him that it was a gentler, softer Maud who was standing here with wistful eyes upraised to his. After all, was it a great thing that she had asked of him? Their two paths would soon be very far apart. Moreover, she had promised, readily and meekly, to go away from Brackenhurst. If they met on Friday, it would indeed be for the very last time.

‘I will do it, Maud,’ he said, after a long pause. ‘And now I must hasten away. Ah, here comes the storm!’

A flash of lightning darted across her upturned face. And then came a peal of thunder, loud and long, that rumbled and rolled away to the distant hills.



CHAPTER XI.

FOOLISH FEARS.

KATE came down to breakfast the next morning, looking as fragile as a white butterfly. At the sight of Captain Ludlow, standing tall and straight by the window, she brightened in an instant, and flitted across the room to his side.

‘Are you better, pet?’ he asked tenderly.

‘Ever so much better,’ she answered.

‘See, my roses are coming back, aren’t they!’

But the cheek that she lifted for his inspection was as pale and delicate as a white rose-leaf. There was no tinge of pink on that pure pallor.

He took her in his arms with a sigh.

‘Why are you such a sprite?’ he said.
‘What gave you that terrible headache?’

‘Nothing,’ she told him, hiding her face on his shoulder.

‘Is that quite true?’ he inquired.

‘Well, then; I think it was your coming so suddenly. I was over-glad, you know. And there’s such a fuss going on in the house—such a bustle of preparation!’

‘I see. It is a trying time for my little blossom. But it will soon be all over; and then we shall get some rest.’

‘We are always looking forward to something, aren’t we?’ said Kate, lifting her face again. ‘There isn’t time to feel how sweet

the present is. I am realizing its sweetness now : just for this one little moment.'

'My dear child, you will have thousands of such moments !'

'Ah, how can one be sure of that ? This is *now*—a delicious *now*.'

His arms were folded round her ; his darkly handsome face was bent over her sunny head. Through the open window came the sweet breath of morning. The air was cool and clear after last night's storm ; a light breeze brought in a few petals from the monthly roses, and strewed them over the floor.

The pair were alone together—alone in the freshness of the early day. Who does not know the strange, delicate charm that lingers about such fragments of time ? Footsteps were heard ; the strong arms were unclasped ; and when the others entered the room, Kate and Sidney were

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several feet apart. He was whistling softly and looking out at the sky. She was picking up rose-leaves from the carpet.

The day wore away. But when Kate rested her head on her pillow that night, she was constrained to acknowledge that it had been an unsatisfactory day. Was anything amiss with Sidney? No, she thought not. Yet she certainly had not had as much of him as usual. There had been a broken morning; a strange clergyman came to luncheon; one or two formal callers spoiled the afternoon. Then a vicar from a neighbouring parish had dined with them, and stayed long enough to curtail the evening music. When he was gone, Granny had declared that Kate looked too pale to sit up a moment longer.

And Sidney had agreed with Mrs. Hay. He did not seek to detain Kate. And although his good-night had been very

tenderly spoken, she had seen an absent look in his eyes. Love always resents such looks. Where had his thoughts wandered. Her little spirit was restless because it could not follow them.

Captain Ludlow, too, went early to his room that night, and lingered a little, looking out of his window. He thought of Maud in the dreary cottage, dreaming of the lover who could never be hers again. He seemed to feel her firm white hand clasping his, and a thrill ran through him at the mere fancy.

What would she do, he wondered, when he was married? His own path with Kate lay before him clear and plain enough. But whither would Maud's lonely way lead her? Downhill or uphill, crooked or straight, that path, she had vowed, should never cross his own again.

He was half sorry that he had promised

to see her on Friday. His last assignation with Maud had ended in a disaster, he remembered.

‘Suppose some one sees us!’ he thought.
‘But no, that isn’t likely.’

And then he recalled the stolen meetings of other days, when they were a pair of wilful young lovers, bent on eluding the vigilance of watchful friends. Maud had always been clever in devising plans for secret interviews. And there had been a spice of risk and adventure in their old love-making that had given it a charm.

But Captain Ludlow was older and wiser now, and such risks had lost a good deal of their flavour. The course of his new love had been running smoothly enough. There had been no need to bribe servants; convey notes in fans; leave letters at a pastry-cook’s; and invent Masonic signs. He could not imagine his little Kate having a

secret. She was so delicate and innocent and pure, that you could look into the depths of her heart as freely as if it were the heart of a flower. He would never let her know anything about Maud and his old infatuation. She was easily worried, poor darling, and so fragile! A little fright would drive the pink out of her cheeks; a little pain would take all her strength away.

As to Maud, it seemed improbable that that young woman had ever known anything in the shape of illness. She was a splendid specimen of health and vigour. He recalled her as she stood among the sunflowers in her black gown, a grandly-modelled figure, firm and strong. He did not want to see too much of her; he was glad that she meant in future to avoid him. But it was impossible to recall her image without a heart-throb. And he pitied her :

in spite of all the past, he pitied her deeply.

He could not help feeling a little guilty when he received Kate's morning greeting. That April face of hers was brighter after a night's sleep. She clung to him in her pretty, wistful way when the time came for his departure.

'You foolish pet!' he said. 'You will have enough of me by-and-by!'

'Ah, but I hate good-byes,' she answered. 'Don't you ever think of the things that may happen between a parting and a meeting?'

'Life wouldn't be worth having if we did think of them! You are all nerves, Kate? What shall I do to set your little heart at rest?'

He took her into his arms, and held her in a long close clasp. At that moment he bitterly repented his rash promise to

Maud. Not that he feared discovery, but he hated the meanness of the whole thing. They were good people at the Vicarage, simple and true. Why could he not be quite true also? And yet, it was only a small matter—just a little deception that he would never have to practise again.

‘Sorry to disturb you,’ said the Vicar’s voice outside the door. ‘But if you must go by this train, there isn’t any time to lose. The chaise is waiting.’

‘Go,’ whispered Kate, as he bent over her for another kiss. ‘Go; and I’ll promise not to fret a bit. It will be only for a little while. You’ll write to-night?’

‘Do I ever forget to write?’ he asked, lingering fondly over the delicate little face.

‘My dear boy, you’ll think me quite a nuisance!’ came from the other side of the door. ‘But if you *do* mean to go by the next train——’

Sidney dashed out into the hall, and bade Mr. Ryan a hurried farewell. Kate stood at the window and watched the chaise as it rolled out of the gate; and even when it had disappeared, she listened eagerly to the sound of the departing wheels. Her treasure was being borne away from her—‘only for a little while,’ as she had said. But her poor little heart was strangely disquieted with nervous fears. It was wrong, she felt, to give way to this foolish despondency. It would irritate Granny and pain her father if she went on fretting. And, besides, she had just promised Sidney that she would not fret. Oddly enough this last thought set her lips quivering again. She stifled a sob, turned quickly away from the window, and came face to face with Mrs. Hay.

‘Hoity toity!’ said Granny, inspecting her with sternness. ‘Now do you really

think it worth while to cry after a man who is coming back to marry you in a month? I hope you won't be falling out with him by-and-by! "Love me little, love me long," says the old proverb. Come, come, be reasonable!

'I am a little silly,' Kate confessed, blushing and brightening at the old lady's scolding.

'Oh, you do think you are! Then there is a hope that you will listen to reason. Doesn't it strike you that you had better not waste any more of this lovely day?'

'You don't mean to send me out walking, Granny? I've been in the garden all the morning!'

'And what good did the garden do you? Shall I tell you how you spent your time there? I could see your philandering from my bedroom window.'

‘How horrid of you to look!’ cried Kate hotly.

‘Don’t excite yourself, Miss Ryan. It wasn’t worth looking at,’ said Mrs. Hay, with a twinkle in her eyes. ‘Besides, I am not wholly inexperienced in that kind of thing. But you will admit, I think, that you were not exactly taking pedestrian exercise?’

‘Well, perhaps not, very much.’

‘Then I must insist that you go out with Muriel. Yes, this very minute! The child can’t settle to her lessons to-day. Indeed I fear there will be no permanent settling for any of us yet! These comings and goings are turning the household topsy-turvy.’

Kate pouted and yielded. Tripping off to dress, she met Mew with her hat on, and a basket on her arm.

‘What are you going to do with that basket?’ Kate inquired. ‘You don’t want

to dig up roots, do you, Mew ? That always makes such a dreadfully long business of our walks, you know.'

'Oh' no ; I don't want any more roots,' Mew answered. 'They aren't good for much—those ferns and things that I get myself. And I'm to have your own bit of garden, you see, when you are married. I shan't let any rubbish grow there.'

'Well, why do you carry the basket ?'

'Granny is going to fill it with fruit. We've got to take it to Stone Cottage. One of the ladies there is sick, she says.'

'Stone Cottage—oh, I don't want to go there!' said Kate.

'I do,' exclaimed Mew. 'Don't be disagreeable. You know I've always longed to be inside that little gate. And I've been so good ; I wouldn't climb the wall because it would have vexed you. It's cost me many a bitter pang not to do it !'

Again Kate yielded, but not with a very good grace. She came downstairs five minutes afterwards, and found Mew awaiting her in the hall. The basket was lined with leaves, and filled with those delicate plums which were the pride of the Vicarage garden.

‘That poor old Mrs. Fancourt is ill,’ said Granny. ‘Those women hate to be called upon. But we must be kind. You need not go into the house, Kate; just leave the fruit with a civil message.’

The two girls went out into the still sunlight of the afternoon, and Granny stood watching them from the door. Could she have foreseen the manner of their return, how eagerly she would have followed, and dragged them back! But she stood looking after them with a smile on her fine old face. Bees were humming; the air was sweet with mignonette; burnished ivy-

leaves were shining in the sun. The old lady was conscious of a delicious sense of contentment and peace. Just for a moment or two she sat down in the porch, and floated off to a tranquil dreamland.

The girls passed through the open gate, and turned their steps towards the narrow lane which ran past Stone Cottage. The quiet of the dying summer rested on wood and field; in this warm southern village the harvest was all gathered in—not a sheaf was left standing. Even Mew (a born chatterer) was lulled into stillness, and walked sedately with the basket on her arm. But her sober moods never lasted long, and were generally followed by an outbreak of wild spirits.

‘Here we are!’ she said, as they stopped at the rusty little gate. And there was a mischievous gleam in her dark eyes that ought to have given Kate a warning.



CHAPTER XII.

IN MAUD'S GARDEN.

LATE opened the gate, and took the basket into her own hands. The little house was as silent as a tomb : not a sound could be heard, although the casements were unclosed. Just as Miss Ryan was lifting her hand to the knocker there was a smothered laugh from Mew ; turning her head quickly, she saw the child running at full speed down one of the narrow paths of the rambling garden.

‘ Mew !’ she called after her ; but Mew

was gone. The desire to explore that mysterious old garden was too strong to be overcome. Kate was vexed.

There was a general impression in the village that Mrs. Heatherstone was a haughty woman, who resented the least intrusion; it was also rumoured that she spent a great deal of time in her garden. What would she think or say if Mew suddenly broke in upon her privacy? After a moment of irresolution Kate set her basket down upon the threshold, and went off in quest of her unruly companion.

The garden was large, and flowers and shrubs grew so thickly that the whole place seemed made for hide-and-seek. It was almost as bewildering as a maze. Paths opened to right and left; and Kate looked in vain for a glimpse of Mew's grey frock. A flush of vexation came into her cheeks, and she stood still to listen for footsteps;

but Mew's flying feet made no sound upon the grass, yet, as she paused, a slight rustle did certainly meet her ears, and then a low murmur of voices.

Right in front of her ran a path which must surely have tempted Mew. It was bordered with ranks of sunflowers—such sunflowers as the Vicarage garden had never yet produced. They were the largest and most gorgeous that Kate had ever seen. Embarrassed though she was, her glance lingered on the rich blending of russet and gold, and she passed them slowly. At every step she trembled lest Mew should suddenly appear, flourishing one of these gigantic flowers in triumph ; it was too much to hope that the child would leave the garden without taking something as a trophy.

The path ended abruptly at an old summer-house, much battered and decayed by time. It was overhung by a dense cloud

of jessamine, and the little space of sward around it was whitened with fallen blossoms. The scent was overpoweringly sweet. Again Kate paused ; and this time her feet refused to carry her another step—she stood as motionless as if some invisible power had chained her to the ground.

A man and woman were standing just in front of the summer-house. The woman was tall, and the sun fell on a mass of golden hair, knotted up carelessly, and breaking out into rough loose tresses. Her back was turned to Kate. Her arms were round the man's neck, and his hands were clasped about her waist ; she had drawn his face down to hers. O God ! whose face was it ?

Either Sidney Ludlow, or some evil spirit in his likeness, was standing there, with a passionate trouble in his dark eyes. No, it could not be Sidney ; he had gone away in

the train more than an hour ago, and this was all a wild dream ! But he was speaking—yes, it was his voice ; and the woman was clinging closer and closer !

Kate saw no more : a great black cloud came suddenly over her sight ; a sharp cry went ringing through the garden, and she dropped, like a dead thing, with her face to the earth. That cry was echoed by a muttered curse that reached Maud's ear alone. In the next instant Captain Ludlow had freed himself from her hands, almost flinging her from him ; and then she saw him on his knees by that still figure, gently raising it, and gathering it into his arms.

Her punishment was complete at last. As she stood there, silently looking on, she knew that nothing on earth was so hateful to Sidney Ludlow as herself. Her schemes, her wiles and witcheries, had brought about this result. Hard and intrepid as she was,

she dreaded to meet his eyes.. She did not dare to move or speak, not even to offer aid. Helplessly and mutely she watched him as he strode swiftly away with his light burden, knowing that if she followed she should hear that muttered curse again.

He did not go down the long path to the garden gate. With swift steps he marched straight across the flower-beds, scaled the low wall, and made at once for the Vicarage. It was only a few yards away ; there was little loss of time. Afterwards, when he looked back upon this day, he recalled one over-mastering feeling : he must take Kate away from that hateful spot. If her eyes ever unclosed again, they must not rest upon the last objects that they had seen. He hardly knew whether he were carrying a dead or a living girl. In his awful agony and remorse it seemed almost presumptuous to hope that she would be given back to life.

Swift as he was, Muriel was before him. She had seen Kate fall, and Sidney lift her from the grass ; and quick as thought the child flew homewards, calling for help as soon as she reached the gate. Kate was laid upon the large old sofa in the breakfast-room—that very room in which they had taken their leave of each other. The windows were still wide open ; more rose-petals had drifted in.

‘Don’t you ever think of the things that may happen between a meeting and a parting?’ Kate had said. Oh, heaven ! to think of what *had* happened ; and to know that he had brought it to pass !

Little Muriel was looking up at him, scared at his aspect. His brown face was almost unearthly in its pallor ; his eyes were wild and strained ; the veins on his forehead stood out like cords, and yet the weight that he had carried had been light. He spoke

no word, but stood mutely looking on while others were busy about that inanimate figure.

The old doctor was there too. Some one had flown out and found him ; but he could do little more than had been done already. The delicate little face was set and white as ever ; the brown lashes still rested on the cheeks ; the sweet lips were still colourless. The Vicar had already resigned hope, and was standing with his elbow on the mantelpiece, and his forehead resting on his hand. His sorrow was of the intensely quiet kind : and as Sidney looked at this stricken father the weight grew heavier on his own heart and brain.

No one seemed to wonder at Captain Torwood's presence. It appeared natural enough that he should be standing there among them. They had forgotten his supposed departure ; or, if they remembered it,

it did not seem strange that he should have come back. Does anything seem strange when death is hovering near our threshold? Do not the most unusual things look trivial and commonplace under that awful shadow? Muriel alone had been a witness of the scene in the garden; but she, too, was watchful and silent.

At last there was a faint murmur of thankfulness. No one knew who uttered it. It might, perhaps, have come unawares from Granny's lips: the brave old woman had never left off hoping, and nothing could draw her away from her grandchild's side. Kate had moved slightly, and there was a feeble stirring of the white eyelids. At length there came a sobbing breath. The Vicar heard it, and started from his post at the mantelpiece. Captain Ludlow heard it too, and strode across the room to the sofa.

‘Let me come,’ he said to the doctor, who would have kept him away.

Granny gave him a warning look, and stooped over Kate. The girl’s eyes unclosed, and settled, vacantly at first, on the old lady’s face. Another moment, and the intelligence came stealing back. She smiled faintly.

‘Am I at home?’ she asked, after a pause.

‘Yes, my darling,’ Granny said.

Another pause. Her glance travelled slowly to the spot where Captain Ludlow was standing. There was a pathetic look of pained reproach in the sweet eyes as they rested on him.

They met the agonized entreaty in his gaze before they closed again. An expression of content crossed the white face. She understood (dimly, perhaps) that he wanted to be forgiven.

Dr. Brand sent them all away, insisting

that the patient should be left entirely to Mrs. Hay and himself. He had known Kate from the time when she came, a tiny child, to the old Vicarage with her parents. And he understood that frail and delicate organization, and realized (more fully than any of the rest) how near she had been to death. Even now he feared for the poor worn little heart. Still, there was good reason to hope for returning strength, and he smiled and nodded in answer to the Vicar's murmured words. In the next instant he had turned them all out of the room. Mr. Ryan went straight to his study, and shut himself in. Captain Ludlow strolled aimlessly into the garden.

No one but his poor little Kate knew how guilty he had been. He wondered what she would say or do when she could speak to him again. He did not expect upbraidings. She was too gentle to chide,

too timid to make a scene. But he knew that an explanation was due to her, and he should have to account for his conduct as best he could. Walking up and down the trim lawn, he cursed Maud again. Not only had he swerved from the right when he went to meet her in that lonely garden ; he had let himself be fooled by her eyes and tongue. And now, pacing here in front of Kate's window, he shuddered at the remembrance of that woman's clinging hands, and hated himself bitterly for his weakness.

Come what may, he would be true in future. As he looked towards the room where Kate was lying, he made a solemn vow to himself. He would never fight against his sense of truth and honour again. When she got well (if she ever did get well) he would take her little hand in his, and tell her the whole story of his old infatuation.

He had come to the border of the lawn, and turned to retrace his steps. The turn brought him face to face with Mew, who had run across the grass unheard, and was regarding him with angry black eyes.

‘You are a wicked, wicked boy,’ she said, speaking in a low voice. ‘Cousin Sidney, I’ll never like you any more.’

‘Why not?’ he asked, feeling his face burn under the child’s gaze.

‘You’ve nearly killed Kate! It’ll be your fault if she dies,’ said Mew, trembling with indignation. ‘You pretended to be gone away, and you weren’t gone at all. You came back and spooned with that horrid woman, and Kate saw you. Oh, aren’t you a sneak!’

He tried to say that she was a naughty little girl. But she went on loftily, not noticing the feeble interruption.

‘I haven’t told any of them,’ waving her

hand towards the house, 'and I don't mean to tell. Only I shall never forget. And you'll always know that I know you're mean.'

She tossed her curly black head, gave a parting scowl, and sped away. In spite of all his trouble and remorse, it was impossible not to feel the humour of the situation. He broke into a rueful little laugh as he watched her retreating figure. Mew had unburdened her mind of its load of righteous wrath. She felt that she couldn't possibly be too hard on him. But she also felt herself bound not to betray his secret.

He could not help respecting the child for her honest indignation. She had told him the truth roundly enough, describing his conduct just as it looked to her eyes. He did not think, then, that she had been too severe. He had yielded to Maud's entreaties for a

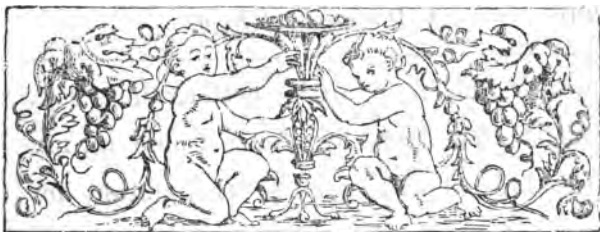
last meeting, knowing all the while that he was not proof against her spells. And, as Mew had said, he had *pretended* to be gone away.

Certainly he was by no means a hero in his own sight. He might blame Maud for being the evil genius of his life. But then he had voluntarily run into the arms of his evil genius ; and she had triumphed through the worst part of his nature. Yes, she had won a triumph, short-lived as it was. It had ended in her own complete defeat, but she had left a sting in two hearts, Kate's and his own.

The sun was sinking lower, level bars of gold lay across the sward : a little breath of wind came faintly blowing over the beds of mignonette. He looked towards the porch, and saw the Vicar approaching him.

‘ You won’t go away to-night,’ Mr. Ryan

said. 'She is a little better, they say. And she has asked for you. Come in, my dear lad; I will send to the station for your luggage.'



CHAPTER XIII.

A FELLOWSHIP WITH HEARTS.

SEPTEMBER came and went. And while Kate Ryan was slowly recovering at the Vicarage, Sir Bertram was slowly dying at the Hall. A letter came from Bride to Eunice Swift, telling of Sir Bertram's condition, and of her broken engagement.

‘I am wearying for a glimpse of old friends,’ she wrote. ‘Ever since I left Seacastle, I have been living in a feverish dream. And yet I think I am happier now

than I have been for a long time. There is a hush in this great house; the days quietly come and go. But I have a sense of freedom that makes it easy to bear the loneliness.'

Eunice was back again in Queen Anne Street, after a long holiday at the seaside. It had been the merriest holiday that she had ever known. Even Mr. Redcliffe had found the sea pleasanter than usual, and had been persuaded to prolong his stay. The Allansons and Angeline had joined them; Mr. Kennard had looked them up, and lingered with the party from day to day. And he and Angeline had delighted in evening strolls on the beach, and long talks under the awning on the pier. Eunice, too, had enjoyed the strolls and talks, but there was a haunting consciousness that her happiness was not quite complete.

Captain Torwood had at last succeeded in getting appointed secretary to an Institution. It was not in his opinion a very interesting Institution, nor was the salary large. But he could manage to live on it, and, with strict economy, to save out of it.

The summer that had been so bright to others had passed away wearily enough to him. He could do no more than dream of a blue sea, and white sails, and gay watering-place society. His old careless life was over now, and done with. And when Angeline met him on her return, she was grieved to see him looking graver and older.

‘What have you been doing with yourself?’ she asked.

‘Making myself acquainted with my new duties,’ he answered; ‘and trying to get used to the dreariness of life. You have

no idea how dull it has been here! But you have had a perfect holiday?’

‘Yes; I never liked the seaside so well. There wasn’t a single drawback to the fun. But Eunice scarcely enjoyed herself as I did. She had been working a little too hard, I think; and she hated all the talk about her novel.’

‘Do people ever hate success?’ he asked doubtfully.

‘Not the success, but the sight of that olive-green cover in everybody’s hands. It was always before her eyes; she couldn’t go anywhere without hearing the book discussed. Mr. Kennard says she hasn’t enough vanity to enjoy popularity.’

‘Mr. Kennard? Oh, he is the man who is always after her, isn’t he?’

‘No,’ said Angeline. ‘They are good friends, of course. But he is not so devoted as you implied.’

Captain Torwood looked at his sister, and was silent. She had spoken a little curtly, he thought ; and she had coloured. Angeline was just as fond of him as ever, of course ; but there was a little falling off in her sisterly devotion. Could he expect anything but fallings-off from anybody ? He was down in the world ; he had lost all chance of a fortune. Angeline was beginning to find out other objects of interest, and who could blame her ? There was that little Miss Swift, too ! A short time ago she had been a poor governess, snubbed and oppressed by her relations. He could distinctly recall a certain moment of tender compassion ; he had actually longed once to take her by the hand, and lead her out into a brighter sphere ! Well, she had managed to get into the brighter sphere without his aid at all. Nobody wanted him. He mocked at himself as he walked

the streets, and remembered the days when he had thought himself one of the favourites of Fate.

‘I suppose I ought to go and call on her,’ he mused. ‘She used to like me pretty well, I think. Is she spoiled by this last great success? Angeline says she isn’t. We shall see.’

He found Eunice alone in the old drawing-room. She was writing letters at a table by the window, and lifted her face eagerly as he came in. Perhaps his greeting was grave; perhaps his losses and troubles had left deeper traces on him than he guessed. Certain it was that he read in her eyes a questioning look—earnest, tender, and yearning. He read it, and it was there. And those grey eyes, and that little outstretched hand, gave him a sudden thrill of gladness.

‘I am glad to be at home again,’ she

said. 'Even at the seaside I used to find myself pining for this old street. But we kept Mr. Redcliffe away as long as we could.'

'He doesn't work much now, I suppose?' asked Captain Torwood.

'No.' Her face was saddened. 'He is obliged to take a great deal of rest. They could do without me now, but they will not let me leave them. I must stay on, and be a daughter, they say.'

'You must be very happy!' he said suddenly. 'You seem to have won everything that you hoped for. Success—friends—a name!'

'More than I hoped for,' she answered frankly. 'The old Eunice only asked for freedom and peace. How you used to talk to me, and give me glimpses of a hidden world! I was laying up stores of wisdom all the time.'

‘Very poor wisdom,’ he said. ‘And it was of more use to you than to me. I didn’t manage my own affairs particularly well, you see !’

‘I am so grieved that you should have been unfortunate,’ she replied.

‘Don’t grieve about me, Miss Swift. I have no right to complain. Other men have had worse troubles, and have borne them a great deal better.’

‘Oh, I think you have been very brave! The world had so petted you, that reverses must have seemed terribly hard. If I had been in your place I should have been quite crushed !’

‘No,’ he answered ; ‘you have a higher kind of courage than mine. I used to laugh at people who had an object in life. I see now that it is a good thing. When other things fail, there is still the goal.’

She looked at him and smiled. 'I never had anything but the goal,' she said.

He was touched by her little reference to the barrenness of her old lot. His own life had become stern and cold all at once; their conditions had changed. Around her there was now an atmosphere of summer; but she could not enjoy the warmth and brightness alone. Her look and tone asked him to come and sit in the sun. He went away, feeling that there was one genial spot where a welcome always awaited him.

After he was gone, she sat and mused in the afternoon dusk. Another visitor broke in upon her reverie. This time it was Dr. Allanson.

'I am glad to have found you at home,' he said. 'There is a little patient of mine who desires to see you.'

She rose at once, ready as usual to render

a service ; and he smiled, well pleased at her promptitude.

‘ I see your carriage is waiting,’ she said. ‘ I’ll come back to you in five minutes, Dr. Allanson. I know the value of a doctor’s time.’

He looked after her with an approving glance as she left the room. The doctor was a quiet man, much given to studying characters as well as constitutions. This little woman had touched his ideal of gentle bravery. She was strong, yet sweet ; tender, yet true. It is not always that life rewards such souls as hers. But as he stood and waited in the dim drawing-room, he smiled to think of certain good things that were in store for Eunice Swift.

She returned before the five minutes had passed, and entered, drawing on her gloves.

‘ You don’t ask where you are going ?’ he said, as they went out to the carriage.

‘Why should I?’ she replied. ‘It’s enough to know that somebody wants me.’

The carriage rolled on through the formal old streets, and she leaned back silently in her corner. It was a fair October day—one of those days when it is sweet to be among woods and fields, watching the golden touches of autumn. But Eunice loved the dim London skies, and the gloomy houses and squares. Those houses contained human beings—her unknown brothers and sisters. She had ‘a fellowship with hearts;’ the things that she had most desired were coming into her life. It was not towards wealth or pomp that her eager spirit had turned. She had longed for power; but only for that kind of power which she had won.

They drove on into Grosvenor Square, and stopped at the door of a great house, stately and still. The doctor helped her to

alight, and they entered the mansion together.

The heavy door closed noiselessly behind them.

A butler, grave and silver-haired, preceded them up the great staircase, and Eunice felt as if she were moving in a dream. The stillness was intense. No voice met her ears ; no footfalls could be heard ; all was silence and gloom. And yet it was a house in which many a stately banquet had been held in days gone by. Court beauties had swept down that wide staircase with their cavaliers. Royalty had been there with its star and its charm of condescension ; Whig and Tory statesmen had plotted, by turns, within those walls. To Eunice the place seemed to be full of ghosts—ghosts who only made their presence known by a sigh, or a vague outline seen faintly in the twilight.

The butler ushered them into a rich, faded old room. It was warm with the glow of a fire, and the paler light of wax candles in antique silver candlesticks. An old man was sitting in an armchair near the fire; and Eunice saw that he had a white head and a delicate wax-like face.

He rose stiffly, yet with dignity, and was introduced to her as Mr. Lennox. It was all very strange and dreamlike, Eunice thought. She looked round in vain for the doctor's little patient. It did not seem possible that there could be any children in this quiet house. The old man had an air of proud, old-fashioned courtesy which harmonized with the carved oak and ancient silver. He looked at her with a faint light of interest in his tired eyes.

‘It is very good of you to come,’ he said. ‘My little grandchild has been longing to see you. Indeed, I think she has been

living on the hope for the last day or two.'

He led the way into another room, not far off—a room full of soft light and warm shadows. There was neither gloom nor mystery here. A comely nurse sat at needlework; a large wax doll was enthroned on the top of a chest of drawers. Everything told that it was a child's chamber, and the pretty bed, with its gay satin coverlet, was a dainty nest for a spoiled darling. A small face, with great dark eyes, looked out of a heap of pillows. The eyes seemed to grow larger and larger as they settled on Eunice, and then came a bright smile.

No introduction was needed here. But Eunice's heart gave a quick throb of pleasure and pain.

The child's little arm was resting on a book of fairy-tales—a book with bright

covers that Eunice knew well. Her own old stories (written in dark days, with laughter and tears) had won her this child-friend. Her fairies and bogies had whiled away languid hours, and soothed a little suffering soul. A faint shrill voice—like the ghost of a merry child-voice—gave her a joyful greeting.

‘Oh, you’re come! I’m so glad. I’ve loved them all so much—especially the kind bogey with the ugly face. Sit quite near me, please. May I look at you very close?’

‘Yes, dear,’ said Eunice, stooping to kiss her.

‘You have a nice soft voice—I think the fairy godmother spoke like that. Do tell me, please, where you wrote the stories. Was it in a room like this?’

Eunice shook her head with a little smile. She recalled the whitewashed walls

of her attic—the chill fingers that had held the pen on winter evenings—the shabby shawl wrapped round the shivering shoulders. But she would not cast the shadow of her sufferings over the pages. The child should not know that her bright fancies had had a sorry birth-place.

‘No,’ she said, ‘my room was not so pretty as this. But it was up at the top of the house, and the stars helped me, shining through the window. Stars are very good company, you know. They are like kind eyes.’

‘Yes, I know. Everything up in heaven is kind, isn’t it? I don’t think I shall be afraid to go there. Should you?’

‘Oh no,’ said Eunice calmly. ‘I never did feel afraid when I thought I was going. I always knew I should go straight to some safe, sweet place.’

‘But then there’s the grave,’ whispered the child.

‘And the flowers,’ Eunice said quickly. ‘There’s nothing to be afraid of in God’s beautiful earth. Don’t you love the ground where all the roots are quietly growing? All the flower-life is hidden there. It is up here that things are fading; they are fresh and living under the sod. It must be sweet to be among them.’

‘Oh, I shan’t mind,’ the child said, taking Eunice’s hand in her tiny fingers. ‘But I wanted to see you first, and talk to you about it. I love you better than anyone else—excepting poor grandpa.’

‘I’m glad,’ Eunice answered. ‘I think there’s nothing so good as love.’

She kissed the small thin face again, and went quietly out of the pretty room. It was not until she was once more seated in the carriage, and rolling away from the dim

house, that she could feel like her usual self. After all, it had been only the stillness and the October dusk that had made the old mansion seem so dreamlike. Her heart was aching for the little girl whose life might have been so bright. Why must she be taken away? Why should her place in the world be so soon closed up? It seemed hard, she thought—hard for the white-haired grandfather who idolized her. She could not help speaking out at last.

‘Dr. Allanson,’ she said, ‘is there no hope that she will live? It is so sad that she must go!’

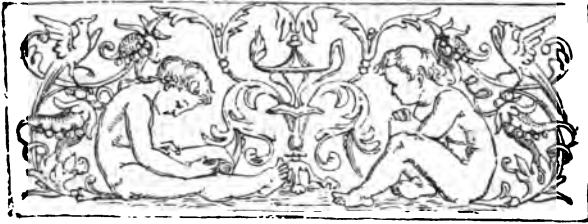
‘It would be sadder still if she stayed,’ he answered. ‘There is an incurable disease of the spine. We could not wish her to linger through years of helplessness and pain. Even her grandfather sees that death is best.’

‘And he worships her,’ said Eunice, with tears in her eyes.

‘No wonder. She is the last of his race; the only child left out of all his children. He is rich; but all his wealth will go to some distant kinsman—somebody he knows little about. I think he is one of the loneliest old men I ever knew.’

Eunice went home full of sorrow and happiness. With her thoughts of the dying child, there were other thoughts strangely blending. Her mind was a confusion of lights and shadows. ‘You seem to have won everything that you hoped for!’ Captain Torwood’s voice was saying. Had she? She wondered what he had read in her face. He had looked at her as if he had found out something. She lay awake for hours that night, thinking of the child’s sweet outspoken love, and of that look in

Lawrence Torwood's eyes. All the wrong things in her inner world had been quietly set right. But she was anxious that another's inner world should also be at peace.



CHAPTER XIV.

A LAST LOVE GIFT.

TWO days after his visit to Eunice Swift, Captain Torwood found himself in Queen Anne Street again. He hardly knew how he got there. But he was conscious that her face had been floating before him ever since their last meeting. And he was also aware of some mysterious influence drawing his steps towards the spot where she lived.

He tried to persuade himself that he took an interest in the street for its own sake.

It was quiet and old-fashioned, and had a host of quaint associations. He looked at the iron extinguishers on the area railings, and thought of the link-boys, and the patched and powdered beauties under the flare of their torches. But it wouldn't do. He did not go there to gaze at extinguishers; nor did he care to conjure up visions of Sacharissa in her rouge and diamonds. He wanted to meet the glance of certain dark-grey eyes, and to see a trim little figure in a nineteenth-century costume. And he had his heart's desire.

It was early in the afternoon. Even in town the golden charm of autumn was not entirely lost. A tender glory touched the commonplace bricks and mortar. The air was soft and still; the light pure and calm; Eunice, walking briskly along the street, was moving in a tranquil little dream.

She was a sober little woman, in a warm

russet-coloured dress. There were bits of shady golden ribbon about her, here and there; and she had an autumn aspect. But hers was a genial autumn, rich with a subdued glow; and she found favour in Captain Torwood's sight. He quickened his pace, and went forward to meet the brown-and-golden maiden with a glad heart.

'Isn't this a perfect day!' he said. 'A day that makes one think of dreamy old Seacastle, and the ivied walls! I can fancy the quiet light on the sea this afternoon.'

He had turned with her, and was walking by her side.

She looked up with a questioning glance.

'Do you want to go there?' she asked.

'Not now,' he answered. 'But there are certain days, you know, when the fancy goes a-travelling.'

‘And you have had no holiday this year,’ she said regretfully.

‘I think my holiday is just beginning. Life is looking brighter than it did last month.’

His tone was so simple and tender that she looked up again. Their eyes met. There was a quiet contentment in his face that she had never seen there before.

‘You have got Angeline back again,’ she said.

‘I am not sure that I have. It strikes me forcibly that Angeline doesn’t belong to me so much as she did. And she is getting fearfully intellectual. Her information on abstruse subjects really appals me. Can you account for it?’

‘Well, she sees Mr. Kennard very often,’ smiled Eunice. ‘And one learns a great deal from him.’

‘I guessed as much. Her room is

literally crammed with high-class journals. I don't think she ever looks at a lady's newspaper or a fashion-book nowadays. But she was nicer when she was more frivolous.'

'She is as nice as ever,' Eunice said loyally. 'Only the influence is fresh, and it has carried her completely out of her old groove.'

'Will it be a lasting influence, I wonder?'

'I think it will. He seeks her, evidently. They seem to be drawing closer together.'

They were coming out now into Oxford Street, and it was not so easy to sustain a conversation. It did not occur to Captain Torwood to ask where Eunice was going. They simply walked on, in a pleasant aimless fashion, until they got to the Marble Arch, and turned into the park.

'Won't you tell me a little more about

yourself?' she said, speaking after a pause. 'You say that life is brighter. Is there any happy change?'

'Not in my prospects,' he answered frankly. 'They are about the same. But my work is light, and I am getting used to it.'

'And there may be something better to come. When there is a rift in the clouds it is sure to widen.'

'There is a rift,' he said. 'I had my first glimpse of blue when I saw you the other day. I was morbid and lonely, and you did me good.'

She looked out across the park, into a space of misty gold. Her eyes shone as if they had just caught sight of some paradise, seen only in dreams until this moment.

'I am glad,' she said simply.

They turned their steps homeward, speak-

ing only of everyday things, yet conscious of unuttered sympathies. The gold of the day was beginning to fade when they paused at Mr. Redcliffe's door.

‘You will come in?’ said Eunice, with a touch of earnestness in her tone.

He smiled, with a slight movement of his head, and his blue eyes looking intently into hers.

The two old people made him welcome. It was not their day for seeing visitors, but they received him as Eunice's favoured friend. Mr. Redcliffe, always quiet, was now seldom disposed to talk much; but there was nothing sullen in his taciturnity. His was the silence that proceeds from a gentle weariness. He looked very worn and bent; and his face (which had been keen and eager once) was now intensely peaceful. He had done with all the great questions of life. Or perhaps he knew that

he was going where he should find them answered, and so was content to wait.

Mrs. Densley was one of those old ladies who are always popular with young men. Lawrence liked her delicate old-world ways. Her face was still pretty in its winter bloom, framed quaintly in soft rolls of silver hair and old lace. There was a subtle scent of lavender clinging to her dress—an old-fashioned perfume that was like a memory of bygone summers. She looked as fragile as one of her own porcelain cups; and yet (like the old china) she had survived a good many of the chances and changes of time.

Captain Torwood drank his tea in an atmosphere of sunshiny calm. He was well accustomed to the delicate flatteries which men of his stamp receive from women. But no flattery had ever been so sweet as Eunice's happy smile and shining

eyes. She had all the grace of society without its insincerity; her gladness was a genuine gladness: she feigned nothing. Her successes and triumphs were all forgotten or put out of sight; she made him feel that he was just as welcome as in the days when her life was barren, and her friends were few.

He went back to his lodgings in a pleasant mood. He had moved into comfortable rooms, but the furniture was poor, and the old luxurious trifles were all gone. Yet the darkest days of his adversity were over; and there had come to him many a cheery letter from old comrades, giving scraps of news from the fashionable world. One of these letters lay unopened on his table. It had been delivered in his absence; and he took it up, and read it by the light of the fire.

‘I’m not in good scribbling form,’ the

letter said; 'but I want to know how you are getting on, old man, and I can't wait any longer. By the way, I met a fair friend of yours at Cowes; but we didn't talk of you. I suppose there is no chance of mending the broken link? She looks colder and older. Your place, I believe, is not yet filled up.'

Lawrence smiled as he folded up the letter.

'It soon will be filled,' he said.

He had never caught a glimpse of Celia since their encounter in Regent Street. Sometimes he was almost astonished to find how slight a trace she had left on his life. Her image was fading fast. In days to come it would be a mere phantom, whose features had lost all outline and meaning. No; the broken link would never be mended, and there had been little pain in the breaking.

Scarcely a week went by before Eunice had another call from Dr. Allanson.

‘I can guess your tidings,’ she said sadly.

‘My little friend is gone?’

‘Yes,’ he answered; ‘but you don’t guess everything: I am the bearer of her last love-gift.’

Eunice opened and read the letter which he put into her hand. As she read, her face flushed and grew pale again. Then she looked up at him with bewildered eyes.

‘Oh, it’s too much!’ she said tremulously. ‘Think of all the people who have written far better books than mine, and gone poor to their graves! Why is this come to *me*? Oh, Dr. Allanson, ought I to take it?’

‘Do you think you are robbing somebody else?’ he asked, with a smile. ‘I can set your mind at rest. The six thou-

sand pounds that little Ida Lennox has given to you was verily her own to give. It was her mother's dowry—a dowry that her husband did not need, and put aside untouched. She knew that it was hers to “do as she liked with.” Lately, she has talked about it night and day. “I am going away,” she said, “and I want to give it to *her*.”’

Eunice could not keep back her tears.

‘You gave her your bright fancies,’ the doctor went on. ‘You peopled her sick-room with the beings you had created. In their quaint way, those beings taught her faith—hope—trust. This is more than the mere whim of a dying child. It is the gift of a loving spirit, eager to give something for all that it has received.’

He went his way, and Eunice stole upstairs to her own room, to think and cry in solitude. The sunshine was dying slowly

off the house-tops ; mists were creeping up the long, dim street. She did not understand. She wanted to be sure that this treasure was rightfully her own. Why were her poor thoughts so richly paid for, when great thinkers had got nothing for theirs ? And then, as the dusk deepened, her heart grew quieter, and voices seemed to be speaking in the silent room. Whose voices ? She could not tell. They recalled her own blighted childhood ; her crushed, sorrowful girlhood. They reminded her of weak hands, giving loving service when they had nothing else to give. They spoke of sympathy with the distressed ; of bright thoughts, poured out freely to gladden child-hearts ; of longings to help others, even when her own feet were clogged with mire and clay.

What a long time it takes for the good measure to be pressed down, and shaken

together, before it is poured into the bosom ! Eunice was comforted by her solitary musings ; but she never could believe that she deserved the child's love-gift. Somewhere in this crowded street—in that lonely village—there were waiting lives that ought to have been crowned instead of hers ; she could only hope that their turn would come.



CHAPTER XV.

A FAMILY GATHERING.

EUNICE wrote to Lavinia, telling her about the legacy; and Lavinia wrote in return, to say that Eunice was expected to visit Seacastle. Mr. Swift was seized with fatherly yearnings for the absent daughter. Mrs. Goad was heard to say that blood was thicker than water; and she could find it in her heart to forgive her sister for the past.

‘I shall start off to-morrow,’ said Eunice to Angeline. ‘They want to bury the

hatchet ; for my part, I am willing with all my heart !'

' But you won't stay there long ?' asked Angeline.

' No ; I can't spare much time. They will be satisfied when they have seen me, and said their say.'

' Ah, well, it is right to go !' said Angeline. ' But we don't want you to be drawn back into the old life. There is no fear of their wishing to keep you, I hope ?'

' No fear at all : they are all happier without me. If I remained, Matilda would regard me as a rival queen. There would be more strife than ever.'

It was a tedious journey ; and the day was grey and still. The gold of the year was getting tarnished now ; heavy rains had drenched the autumn glory of the trees. There was a forlorn look about the low-

lying villages : farm-yards were miry ; gardens were sodden and colourless.

Eunice felt the dreariness of the country, and looked back regretfully to warm London rooms and shops getting ready for the coming winter. She was going to be an exile for a few days—a willing exile, it is true, yet not without her pangs. The scent of decaying leaves came in through the open window of the carriage. It was a scent that made her think of dead hopes, dead friendships, dead loves ; yet what had she to do with these things ? Other lives were encumbered with them, not hers.

It was evening when the train stopped at last at the familiar little station. An upright black figure was standing on the platform, and Eunice knew it at a glance. She summoned the porter, got out of her carriage, and went up to it at once.

‘ Lavinia ? ’ she said quietly.

‘Oh, Eunice! is it really you? I got quite confused trying to see you; the train came in so suddenly!’ said Mrs. Bertie.

The sisters kissed each other, and descended the steps that led from the platform to the road. The porter followed with a portmanteau of modest dimensions. The fly was waiting—a musty old vehicle that smelt like a hearse. Eunice thought of Luke Gosling and his donkey-cart. It was all chilly and cheerless; and poor Lavinia, trying to frame neat speeches, discovered that her command of language was small.

‘Is papa well?’ Eunice asked.

‘Oh yes! We were all glad when your telegram came,’ Lavinia answered; ‘we thought, perhaps, that——’

‘That I shouldn’t come so quickly? Well, I don’t like delays; you wanted to see me, and I was ready to come. How is Matilda?’

‘She has been a little depressed; there have been worries in her house. First of all, Mademoiselle turned out very badly, and had to be sent off in a hurry; and the girls have been unmanageable ever since she was with them. You used to think Mademoiselle a mistake.’

‘I shouldn’t have trusted her myself; but I always had fancies and prejudices.’

‘You were right about her. It has been a trial for Matilda; she feels that Mademoiselle’s conduct has lowered her in the eyes of the village. Don’t refer to the subject unless she does.’

Eunice promised to be silent. They were passing the well-remembered houses; she could see lights gleaming from Verbena Lodge; and then came the brightly illumined windows of Myrtle Villa.

‘I hope you will let me sleep in my old attic, Lavinia?’ she said, after a pause; ‘I

like it better than any room in the house.'

'I knew you would like it best,' Lavinia answered. 'Papa said it wasn't good enough for you; he wanted me to give you my room.'

No one could have seen Eunice's smile in the gathering darkness. Mrs. Bertie had spoken in her usual impassive voice; she seemed to accept the change in Mr. Swift's views with utter apathy. What did she really think about the matter? Eunice had never found it easy to read Lavinia's mind.

There were lights in all the windows of White Cottage. The front door was wide open: there was a lamp in the entry, and rays of ruddy firelight flickered in the passage. Rachel stood at the little green gate, her white apron showing out in the gloom. Mr. Swift was stationed on the doorstep.

Eunice rather wondered at her own want of emotion. This home-coming—which might have been worked up into a touching scene in a novel—was actually tame and commonplace. She pressed Rachel's hand as the girl eagerly helped her to alight from the fly; and then she went up to her father and calmly kissed him.

‘I'm glad to see you again, papa,’ she said, in an easy tone. ‘How bright the house looks! I have had quite a dreary journey.’

‘There's a fog coming on,’ said Mr. Swift, endeavouring to be easy too. ‘Damp weather for travelling, isn't it? I dare say you are a little chilled?’

‘Just a little,’ Eunice allowed.

She stepped at once into the sitting-room, and went towards the blazing fire. The warm glow fell upon her rich mantle and furs, and revealed the composed face and

dainty bonnet. They looked at her intently, and something in her aspect silenced them. What was it? Only the sudden consciousness that she belonged to their world no more—that the gulf between her and them was wider than they had ever supposed.

The pause was noticeable. She broke it by asking pleasantly when she should see Matilda.

‘Oh, Matilda will come in presently,’ Mr. Swift replied. ‘She has been worried by that fine French governess of hers. Better have engaged a decent English-woman; Goad always thought so.’

Eunice wondered how anyone could possibly have discovered Mr. Goad’s opinion on the subject. That meek man had never yet been known to utter his thoughts. She detected a slight want of reverence in her father’s tone. Had Matilda’s splendour ceased to dazzle his eyes? She hid the

smile she could not repress, and followed Lavinia upstairs.

The old attic had assumed quite a festive air. A fire was burning brightly in the long-disused grate ; a bunch of golden asters adorned the mantelshelf. The little bed was decked with draperies, and the window had pretty chintz curtains. Eunice recognised Lavinia's looking-glass, and a pair of pink china candlesticks belonging to Mrs. Goad.

'Lavinia,' she said, 'you need not have made my poor old room so fine ; I didn't want to see any changes. You have been taking too much pains for me !'

Mrs. Bertie looked at her doubtingly. Did she really expect to be still treated as a nobody ?

'I don't mind taking pains,' she answered at last. 'If it had been possible, I would have done more for you, long ago.'

I dare say it does seem mean of us to make a fuss now.'

Eunice went up to her, and kissed her.

'Oh, Lavinia, I never thought you mean!' she said. 'Do you think I've forgotten the wine and the sandwiches? You always felt kindly, I know. But you didn't feel strong enough to take up my cause boldly. No one could blame you.'

'Well, I have blamed myself sometimes,' Lavinia sighed. 'I had some wretched hours after you were gone. It was dreadful to come up here, and think how you used to sit and fret by that window. I wonder if mamma ever knew? I hope not.'

'You mustn't trouble yourself with such thoughts.' Eunice's voice was very gentle. 'It must have been difficult for papa and Matilda to get on with me; I know I used to sit and sulk at Matilda's parties. Of course it was trying for her.'

Mrs. Bertie smiled sadly.

‘Matilda never had any trials,’ she answered. ‘She was married before the reverses came upon us. She has done nothing but domineer all her life.’

‘She was a little like Juggernaut,’ laughed Eunice, throwing off the furred mantle, and untying her bonnet-strings.

Lavinia stood and watched her silently. She noticed the softly rounded outlines of her sister’s figure, and recalled the thin, dreary looking girl of other days.

‘What a charming gown!’ she said.

‘And that fur on your mantle is so lovely!’

‘Do you like it?’ asked Eunice gaily.

‘Well, that’s fortunate, for I’ve got a mantle for you in that box! It has plenty of fur about it; I wanted to see you looking sumptuous and dignified. You always did pinch yourself too much.’

Lavinia’s stolid face actually brightened.

She cast a longing glance at the large pasteboard box, lying beside the neat port-manteau.

‘I hope it won’t annoy Matilda,’ she said. ‘You are very good, Eunice.’

‘Oh, I’ll undertake to soothe Matilda!’

Eunice spoke with such smiling audacity that Mrs. Bertie took courage.

A comfortable tea was ready downstairs. The table was smartly set out, and some of Mrs. Goad’s best wine sparkled in the decanter. Eunice brought a good appetite to the feast; she praised everything, and delighted Mr. Swift with her cheerful talk. She chatted about town-doings, and gave him a great deal of interesting information. He sat and wondered at her, thinking that he had never been so well entertained in his life.

Just before the meal came to an end Matilda was mentioned again. There was

a little more talk about Mademoiselle ; Mr. Swift shook his head hopelessly.

‘ Matilda isn’t always right,’ he remarked. ‘ But she can’t endure to be contradicted. It’s a great pity. We must let her take her own way.’

When the table was cleared they drew their chairs nearer to the fire. There were a hundred questions to be asked and answered. A loud knock at the hall-door interrupted the conversation. Mrs. Bertie rose, looking a little flurried and anxious ; Eunice’s face was perfectly composed. In another minute Matilda and her husband came in.

Mrs. Goad was flushed and nervous. She had tied a woollen scarf over her mouth to keep out the foggy air, and she could not get it off at the right moment. She had prepared a suitable little speech, half dignified, half conciliatory. But it was uttered

in muffled accents, and a little bit of wool got into her throat and produced a tickling cough. Lavinia came dutifully to her relief, and unwound the perverse scarf; but the moment for making a good impression had gone by. Eunice, calm and genial, had spoken her pleasant greetings, and had shaken hands with Mr. Goad before Matilda had fairly regained her breath.

When they had all gathered round the fire again, there was an awful pause. Lavinia trembled. She knew that such pauses are too often broken by some unlucky remark. She would have given anything to have made some safe observation. But no fitting sentence occurred to her mind; and she looked from one relation to another in dumb anguish. Eunice understood her anxiety quite well, and was tranquilly amused; but she broke the silence with perfect ease.

‘I haven’t told you all about my legacy yet, papa,’ she said. ‘I waited till Matilda came, because I wanted her to hear the little story.’

Mrs. Goad looked pleased, and Lavinia gave her a glance of gratitude. And then, in the simplest way, she told them of her visit to the doctor’s little patient—of the dim house in Grosvenor Square—the brief talk by the bedside. It was by no means a lengthy narrative, but they were all in tears before she got to the end. Mr. Swift found a drop trickling unawares down the side of his nose; Mr. Goad openly produced his handkerchief. As to Matilda, she was too honest to be ashamed of weeping; and Eunice had never liked her so well before. Lavinia was glad to be allowed to cry quietly. She was afraid to shed her tears till she had seen that other eyes were wet.

At length the Goads rose to depart. And while Mr. Swift and Mr. Goad went to the door to look at the fog, the three sisters had a minute to talk.

‘You will dine with us to-morrow, Eunice?’ said Matilda warmly. ‘And if you don’t mind, I should like to get up a little party before you go away. Everybody wants to see you.’

‘And I shall be glad to see everybody. Matilda, I’ll promise not to be disagreeable this time. I won’t sulk, and I’ll wear a pretty gown!’

‘We’ll let bygones be bygones,’ Matilda replied. ‘But I will frankly say that papa was much to blame. He was too hard on you, Eunice; a great deal too hard.’

She was muffled up again by Lavinia, and went her way. The hands of the timepiece pointed to half-past ten, and Eunice began to long for her pillow.

‘Good-night, my dear,’ said Mr. Swift, as she took up her candlestick. ‘I was very glad to see you so friendly with Matilda. I love family peace. But I don’t mind admitting that Matilda used to misjudge you. She was too severe—far too severe.’

Eunice went up to her attic, and laughed softly to herself in solitude. It was good-humoured laughter, for all the bitterness had been taken out of her heart. She loved her people while she laughed at them; but there was nearly always an undercurrent of fun beneath her emotions. And she could find a great deal to laugh over in the part that she, too, had played that evening.

‘I believe I gave myself airs,’ she thought. ‘I found myself posing as an amiable woman of the world, prepared to make allowances. I was partly myself and

partly a person I have never known. How odd it all is !'

She was wakeful, and got only snatches of sleep. At last, rousing up suddenly, she saw the window faintly outlined in dull grey, and heard the cocks crowing loudly to the dawn.



CHAPTER XVI.

‘ OLD FACES.’

THE fog had cleared away, and there were gleams of sunshine breaking through the clouds.

It was a day of grey and gold ; miry paths were strewn thickly with dead leaves ; not an excursionist was to be seen about the ruins, and the little village seemed half asleep in the pale autumn light. Eunice, bright and active, bent her steps to The Nest, and enjoyed the stillness of the morning.

She fancied that there was a deserted look about the tiny house. It was covered with wet ivy and withered creepers, and the monthly roses did their best to call up memories of the departed summer. They made tender touches of pink here and there, and there was a cheerful blaze of marigolds in the borders of the little front garden. But she missed Hannah's familiar face at the door.

Mrs. Ormiston was getting old and grey. She had pined for Bride in secret, and had fretted herself to a shadow. And she had felt the loss of the trusty old servant, who had understood her better, perhaps, than anyone else. But she brightened a little at the sight of Eunice, and was grateful for her visit.

The minister was away. He had gone to Brackenhurst to say farewell to the dying man, and see his niece. There was little

change in Sir Bertram's condition, only a perceptible decrease of strength. Bride was still living her quiet, lonely life, and waiting for the end. She was not ill, but her uncle thought her looking very weary and pale.

'Do you think she is fretting over her broken engagement?' Mrs. Ormiston asked.

She had been feeling the need of opening her heart to some one. Eunice had walked quietly in, followed by a train of associations, and her natural reserve gave way.

'No, I don't think she is.' Eunice spoke after a brief pause. 'It would have been a brilliant match, and Lord Inglefield was a good man. But I am not sure that she ever loved him.'

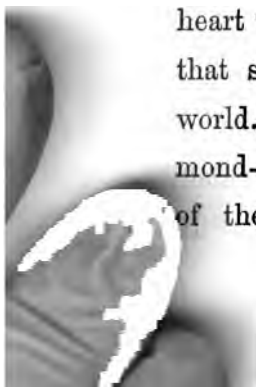
'I don't know. I have no skill in reading hearts,' sighed Aunt Margery. 'I never did understand young people very well, I

believe. And she was always so still and proud.'

'She finds her freedom a relief. His love seemed to burden her,' Eunice said thoughtfully. 'Wait till this melancholy time has gone by, and see if she does not regain her spirits.'

'I have thought—that is, I have been half afraid that she could not forget Captain Ashburn,' Aunt Margery faltered. 'She had a fancy for him, poor child! After he went away there was such a curious meekness and quietness about her. It used to make my heart ache. Those vain, trifling men do such terrible mischief.'

Eunice was silent. Deep down in her heart there had always lurked a conviction that she would not have uttered for the world. She looked out of the little diamond-paned casement, and caught a glimpse of the quiet road. No one was walking



there, but her memory called up two figures that used to pace that old road leisurely in the sunshine. Do we ever come back to old paths, without seeing phantoms of those who once traversed them? Often enough, it is the phantoms who bear us company, and the substantial people who are like shadows.

She said a few cheering words, and took her leave of Mrs. Ormiston. Old neighbours met her as she sauntered back to White Cottage. Mrs. Barron ran out of her door, and gave her a demonstrative welcome; the Coxes came up, all smiles and compliments; Mr. Bassett had his quiet congratulations to speak. The rest of the day was devoted to her friends; there was Matilda's dinner in the evening, and when that was over she went gladly to rest.

And then came Mrs. Goad's party, which turned out to be a brilliant success. If

Eunice had ever spoilt any of her sister's bygone festivities, she atoned for everything that night. Her manner to Matilda was perfect ; a gentle blending of deference and affection. Once, Harriet Cox tried to get her into a corner, and began the history of the French governess. Eunice was pleasant to the Coxes, but there was a shade of indifference in her manner.

‘Oh, I think Mademoiselle's place will soon be filled,’ she said to Harriet. ‘Matilda is very kind to governesses. I mean to send her somebody from town. The girls are getting older, and they naturally need more discipline.’

That entertainment was the means of restoring Mrs. Goad to the proud position she had lost. It was a great triumph. Eunice had worked with her from beginning to end, mingling freely with the guests, yet always hovering round Matilda. They

exchanged quiet signs, and smiles of goodwill which everybody saw. It was evident that there was a perfect understanding between them.

Sunday came, and she went to the dim old church, and filled her old place in the pew. It was rather a dreary service. Mr. Bassett droned away (as usual), in a gentlemanly voice. Harriet Cox's boys rolled their marbles (as usual) across the chancel floor, and the sexton tried vainly to detect the criminals. Mrs. Barron sneezed in the middle of the Creed, and Eunice instantly remembered that she always had sneezed just at that particular sentence. Nothing was changed save Eunice Swift herself.

She took her departure on Monday, promising to return early in the new year. It was past noon when she stepped into her place in the train, and waved an adieu to Lavinia. The weather had brightened

again ; the old castle was touched tenderly with sunshine, and the well-remembered fields were freshly green. Eunice nestled in her corner and closed her eyes. Instead of looking out upon the autumn scenery she fell into a sweet sleep.

The light was dim and grey when the train stopped at its destination. There was the foggy gloom of the great London terminus ; the porters hurrying to the carriage doors ; the never-ending din. Still drowsy, she roused herself, and alighted.

It seemed as if she had been away for months instead of days. The welcome in Queen Anne Street was quiet and tender. Mrs. Densley clung to her, and Mr. Redcliffe held out a feeble hand, and drew her to his side. It was understood that little Ida Lennox's legacy would make few changes in her mode of life. She would not have to work so hard, that was all.

Eunice, shut up in her room that night, began to ask herself what she had been expecting? She had looked for something which she had not found. This return to town was full of quiet happiness, and yet there was a vague hope unfulfilled. It was all indefinite and absurd. People go away and leave part of their lives behind them; and then they come back and wonder that the part they left is just the same. They had some idea that it would be added to; but it is there, unchanged, neither diminished nor increased.

Eunice could not have said what it was that she had expected. And yet her heart was sore and chilled because she was disappointed.



CHAPTER XVII.

EUNICE'S PARADISE.

ANGELINE TORWOOD was a very happy woman in these October days. Mr. Kennard had proposed to her, and Lawrence had patted her on the shoulder, and told her to do as she liked. He did not object to his brother-in-law. He was glad to see Angeline's gladness; but the news of her engagement made him feel himself more than ever alone:

Captain Torwood had very little of the

hero in his composition. He had plenty of dashing courage ; but (as he often said to himself) he could not be great in little things. Yet he was wise enough to know his own weakness, and to be sorry for it. He could accept losses and changes with a perfect external calm, that was grand in its way ; but he had not that inner vital force that lifts a soul above fate.

The tidings of Angeline's engagement and Eunice's legacy had come to him at the same time. Six thousand pounds was not wealth ; it would only insure a modest competency. It was just the sum that his godfather had left to him, and he had lost it. He began to feel himself entirely forgotten by fortune. Angeline was engaged, and Eunice, in a small way, had become an heiress. He felt as if he never could get on with engaged people and heiresses.

Then an old comrade came up suddenly

to town, and they talked of bygone times and new. Couldn't Torwood get a holiday before Christmas ? Well, then, he must promise to run down and spend Christmas at Bath. There would be a good deal going on. People were inquiring after him right and left. Did he remember the Talbots ? Nice girls—very pretty—would have five hundred a year apiece. Nelly Talbot was so glad to hear that he wasn't going to marry that Miss Devereux. There was Mrs. Fletcher, too, wanting to know what had become of him ? Poor Fletcher died at the Punjaub. Lots of men had come to grief lately, in one way or another. Sinclair had never been heard of since Goodwood. Gresham had not held up his head since that affair——. So the talk went on, half-cheering, half-dispiriting Lawrence. He liked to hear news of his old world, but he could not forget that it was partly lost to him.

They would be glad to welcome him back, but they would not pay the old homage. He was weak enough to feel that he should miss the incense that they used to burn before his shrine. They would welcome him, oh yes! But the censers would be swung before others. And yet, what a fool he was! What was the worth of it?

He went back to his rooms, and pondered half through the night. He knew that if he could win back everything—incense and all—he should still be a bored and dissatisfied man.

When he awoke the next morning the autumn sunshine flooded the room. He had slept late. It was Sunday. As he rose and dressed, the sound of church-bells began to fill the air; and he went through his morning toilet slowly, listening to the clang. All the bell-voices were jangling together, singing the same old song in dif-

ferent keys. Some were clear and sharp and imperative; some ding-donged in a sleepy old-world tone; some were plaintive and sweet. As he dawdled over his breakfast, watching the last stragglers hurrying to church, he was conscious of a sense of peace.

How that peace had come to him he could not have explained. We can generally find the origin of strife; but it is not so easy to know the source of a great calm. It comes to us, and overflows our lives unawares. We cease to struggle; we are content with our lot. Yet it is just the same lot that it was a little while ago; the change is not without us, it is within.

After breakfast, he sauntered up and down the quiet Sunday roads in the sun. His new lodgings were in a western suburb, here there were little gardens and trees.

‡ in the sunshine : yellow leaves

drifted slowly down ; and then a wave of organ-music came rolling towards him. By-and-by the people were seen coming from church ; comfortable fathers and mothers ; pretty girls with their prayer-books and cavaliers ; children skipping along, all legs and flowing hair. They amused him to-day. He listened to scraps of chat and prattle with mild interest ; and yet he remembered other Sundays when these sights and sounds had irritated him.

Later on, he was walking westward in the soft glow of the afternoon. The sky was golden when he turned into Queen Anne Street, and there were faint glories lingering about the quaint old houses. Mr. Redcliffe's house was at the end of the street. It had curious iron railings (furnished with huge extinguishers), and there were balconies to the windows. The sound of the door-bell

went echoing through the large quiet house. And then he was ushered upstairs, and into the drawing-room.

Eunice was there alone. She, too, had found peace after a wakeful night or two, and her face was placid and patient. Life was full of good things : could she murmur if the best thing of all were withheld? She had stifled all her vague expectations ; and perhaps the stifling process had made her a little dull and cold. Lawrence missed the eager look, the sunshiny smile. She seemed to come to him out of the shadows.

‘Why are you sitting in that dark corner?’ he asked. ‘Do come nearer to the window. There is one of Turner’s skies to be seen!’

Eunice put down a book of ‘Meditations,’ and mechanically obeyed him. She had been trying hard to enter into the

spirit of that book, and she had failed. The writer's voice had seemed to come echoing out of a cloister; and she was, as we know, an earthly woman, pining after earthly delights. No combination of circumstances would ever have forced her into a nunnery. And yet she could sympathize with women who could find peace and happiness in the tranquil routine. She liked to think of them, singing and praying with calm faces. But she could not join them; she wanted all the very things that they had renounced for ever.

‘What have you been reading?’ he asked. ‘Oh, I see. Why do women always try to be so good on Sunday afternoons? There is generally a reaction. Just at this hour I have invariably found girls sitting with their little manuals, beautifully bound, like yours. They used to put them away,

with smiling alacrity, and plunge into worldly conversation.'

'I'm not worldly; I am earthly,' she answered, in rather a sad tone.

Something in his manner had jarred upon her mood.

'I am very glad to hear it,' he said, looking at her with eyes full of meaning, and an arch smile.

'Why?'

'Because I want to talk to you about earthly things. You wouldn't have listened if you had been in a lofty, self-renouncing frame.'

'I don't know that I want to listen now.'

She was not addicted to lying. And as she popped out that obvious falsehood she blushed and smiled too.

'That was a fib, Miss Swift. You must never read that manual any more. It has

a very bad effect upon a naturally ingenuous mind.'

'I can't soar above earth when you are here!' she said desperately. 'No, I didn't mean to say that' (horrified at the construction that might be put upon her words); 'I only meant that you are antagonistic to spiritual——'

'Aunt Virginia always said so,' he interrupted. 'For heaven's sake don't remind me of Aunt Virginia, there's a dear little woman!'

They both laughed. Out of doors there was the soft brightness of the sunset, spreading farther and farther along the street. The gold seemed to come flowing into the room, tiding over the faded old carpet, and the dim roses and lilies that Mrs. Densley had worked when *her* roses were fresh and young. The room was full of her needlework. Captain Torwood was

sitting upon a gigantic pansy; Eunice's foot rested on a stool which was entirely covered by a vast tulip. Quite suddenly he deserted the monster pansy, and she found him kneeling down by her side.

'Eunice,' he said, with his arms round her, 'I believe you have a sort of kindness for lazy, commonplace men, haven't you?'

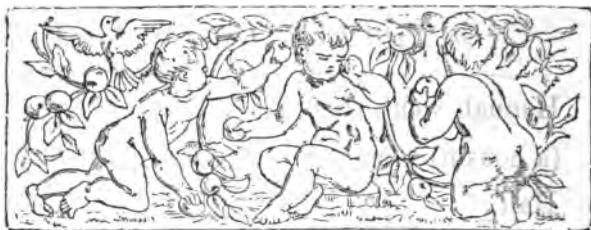
'Yes,' she answered, feeling her inability to utter a second fib.

'Then take me, dear. I'm lazy and commonplace. But I love you, and want you. Will you have me?'

'Yes,' Eunice said.

So these two entered into their paradise, among the impossible woollen flowers and shabby furniture. What a lifetime they had lived since they had stood together on the old ivied wall! What voices had echoed through their lives, and died away!

And now at last they understood themselves and each other. They had found out the best thing in life ; and the sunset enfolded them in the light of a solemn peace.



CHAPTER XVIII.

‘OH, FIRST LOVE ! OH, LAST LOVE !’

IN the spring it was rumoured in Seacastle that Bride was coming back. Coming back, it was said, to The Nest in delicate health ; Sir Bertram had lingered on till the end of November ; and then Bride herself had fallen ill. Mrs. Hay, having successfully nursed her granddaughter, and seen her married to Captain Ludlow, was in want of another girl to nurse. She seized upon Bride, and had her removed to the Vicarage.

Hannah went there too; and the new heir (a cousin) came to take possession of the Hall.

Bride stayed very contentedly with Granny and the Vicar. She was not strong enough to go back to Seacastle, and she was far too weak and languid to try another climate. So she just stayed on, obeying all Granny's commands, and finding a great deal to amuse her in Mew's society. The news of Eunice's marriage came to her early in the new year. She would lie on the sofa in Kate's old room, watching the budding trees and busy birds, and thinking of the fulfilled hopes of other lives. And then they would come to take her out in the low chaise; or sometimes she would be wheeled along through the ferny lanes, with Hannah and Mew in close attendance. She was always gentle and calm, trying to take pleasure in little

things—in brimstone butterflies flitting in the sun—in the barren strawberry-blossoms in the hedges—in the first violets that Mew had gathered. But she soon sank back again into a state of apathy which filled Hannah with dismay.

The long-deferred time came at last. Bride shrank from Seacastle, and yet longed to go back to her faithful guardians. She loved the place, yet trembled at the thought of seeing it again.

She might make a home where she would, for she was a rich woman now; rich, without being a great heiress. But she felt that until her plans were settled, she must find a resting-place at The Nest.

Only she dreaded the sweet, yet bitter associations of the old home. She had never found anything to replace that first love-dream. At first, in the stir and change of a new life, she thought that she had

forgotten. And then came Cora with her whispered talk about old days, and all the buried feelings were brought to light again. She knew that she had not been quite true in heart to Lord Inglefield. Never for a moment had she regretted their parting. Where was he now? Where was Cora? Lover and friend had passed away from her path, leaving no traces behind them.

The train was flying along the flat southern coast, and Hannah was sitting by her side. The journey had been a short one, and they were now very near its end. She looked out upon fields, silvered with daisies and gilded with buttercups. Those flat fields that went stretching away to the edge of the creek—how well she knew them! How well she knew the little grey church, standing amongst its graveyard trees! And then the lonely houses by the white roadside, where the tide came wash-

ing up, leaving seaweed close to the door-steps. Her heart began to throb fast as the train slackened speed. The old love, the old anguish came pressing back upon her again, and she had not strength to put it away. How could she bear it all?

It was a clear evening, early in May; there was a calm sky, not yet touched with gold; a freshness of greenery, a flutter of young blossoms. Uncle Andrew was standing on the platform with a glad, yet anxious face. At the sight of him Bride's tired heart felt a thrill of joy. The carriage door was opened, and she held out her arms to him.

With all his old gentleness he helped her to alight, and she crossed the platform leaning on his arm. Stationmaster and porter did homage to the lovely, haughty woman in the black dress. She was a girl no longer: nowadays she looked older than she

really was. More beautiful than ever, people said ; but staid and proud. Poor child, they knew nothing of the regrets and yearnings that were hidden under that stately grace !

Uncle Andrew placed her in the old fly, and seated himself quietly by her side. With delicate tact he refrained from speaking as they drove homeward : he understood her mood, and left her to herself. She drew back into the corner, unwilling to be seen.

Oh to weep unrestrainedly, as a humbler, less reserved woman would have done ! Eunice Swift had suffered much, but her suffering had been tempered by her sympathy with a sorrowful world ; even in her moments of bitterest pain she had been ready to admit others into her heart. She had loved and studied human beings wherever she had met them ; they interested and amused her. But Bride's nature was full of

closed channels ; sweet common interests could not find their way into her soul. Old Hannah understood this isolation of spirit, and mourned over it in secret. She, too, had dreaded the return to Seacastle, knowing how sorely the proud, constant girl would be tried.

It was but a short distance from the railway station to The Nest ; but to Uncle Andrew and his companion it seemed interminable. At last the fly stopped at the little gate : the faint sweetness of jonquils greeted Bride like a sigh from the past ; and then Aunt Margery appeared in the porch.

She had never seen her niece since Sir Bertram had taken her away. The stateliness, the proud, melancholy beauty took her by surprise ; she started, and was awkward and constrained. Uncle Andrew came quickly to her relief, and atoned for her apparent coldness. But somehow that cold-

ness did not trouble Bride ; she was not looking at Aunt Margery's frozen face, but at the other shadowy faces that had risen up in the little room. She saw Cora Wallace, frank and kind as she used to be ; she met the wistful gaze of Victor Ashburn's eyes. People speak—they utter commonplace words of greeting, and yet every word is a moan. They answer us, yet they are listening to other voices, and we know not what they hear and say. Is it any wonder that we misjudge each other so terribly sometimes ? We can hardly know our friends unless we also know the phantoms with which they are surrounded. If our eyes were opened we should see them standing among their old lovers—their dead or estranged companions ; and we should learn what it was that had come between them and us.

Everyone longed to hasten the lagging

hours that evening. Bride kept on telling herself that she should get used to it to-morrow—that it would all be different by-and-by.

‘I will go early to my room, Aunt Margery,’ she said. ‘I’m afraid I must own to being still half an invalid, but I don’t need to be waited on; you mustn’t trouble yourself about me.’

‘We thought, perhaps, you would bring your maid,’ Mrs. Ormiston remarked awkwardly. ‘I was surprised to see only Hannah.’

‘I parted with Jones before I left the Hall. Indeed, Aunt Margery, she wouldn’t be of much use here. I shan’t be going out, you know; and there will be no millinery nor dressmaking now. There would not have been anything for her to do.’

‘Well, I am glad you did not bring her,’

admitted Aunt Margery, with a sigh of relief; 'this cottage is so absurdly small!'

'It was large enough for us in the old days,' said Bride.

'The old days are done with. You have been living a new life, child; everything here will be too poor and mean for you!'

'Don't say that!' There was a quiver in Bride's voice that went to the minister's heart. 'I can do without luxury and show. There have been sorrows in the new life; it will be good to come back to the old.'

'True, my bairn,' Uncle Andrew said tenderly; 'we often return to old paths to find balm growing there.'

She put her arms round his neck and kissed him, and then went slowly up the dim stairs. It was hardly dark yet: May twilight lingers long, and a star was twinkling faintly above the old pear-tree. She opened the casement: cool leaves brushed

her cheek, and a sweet whisper came creeping up the garden. It seemed to the weary girl like a message from some distant world of peace. Peace? She should find it again one day when she was old and had forgotten everything; and then she shut the window and went languidly to rest.

The next day was Sunday. Hannah said that her young lady was not strong enough to go to church; and Aunt Margery bit her lips and shook her head. The truth was, that Bride did not feel herself equal to the ordeal of seeing Seacastle faces *en masse*, and meeting the gaze of all the eyes in the village. She wanted a little rest first; but Mrs. Ormiston was shocked and distressed.

‘She will have to meet everybody by-and-by,’ she said; ‘isn’t it better to get it over? The longer she stays at home the harder it will be to go out. We mustn’t over-indulge her, Andrew.’

'You are not capable of over-indulgence, Margery,' the minister replied; and there was a steadfast look about his kind eyes and mouth that she knew well. 'You always mean to do right, my dear; but you never did understand nerves and feelings.'

'Well, Andrew, give me your advice about her.'

'You won't take it if I do,' he answered gravely.

'Oh yes, I will! You know I am anxious. What is it?'

'Leave her alone. Don't worry her about anything; let her do just as she likes!'

'Am I to stand still and see her getting paler and more inanimate every day? That is how it will be!' exclaimed Aunt Margery. 'Of course this apathy will grow; I am sure of it!'

'How can you be sure? She has only

been here a few hours. Let her get used to the old home and the old associations, and then you will see.'

Aunt Margery sighed heavily, and went off to morning service in her best bonnet and gown; and her niece strayed away into the garden, and hid herself among the old shrubs and flowers.

The morning passed away, and afternoon crept quietly on. It was one of those placid days that seem to belong to June rather than to May. The shrubbery seat was overgrown with encroaching boughs; the ivy masses had thickened on the low wall; but the buttercup meadow was unchanged. There it lay, shining as of old in the sleepy sunlight—a level waste of gold, scarcely stirred by wandering breezes. The honeysuckle was in bloom again, flinging long tendrils over into the field, and losing its lush trailers among green waving grasses.

Sometimes a rush of sweetness swept over Bride as she sat in her old nook. Swallows were skimming about, finches burst out into their little trills above her, butterflies glanced to and fro ; everything was fragrant and lovely, but nothing satisfied her. She looked out across the glistening field with yearning eyes.

The stillness was intense. No voices came drifting towards her on the soft air : the trill of birds and hum of insects only seemed to deepen the quietness of the spot. She still gazed intently on the golden meadow till her eyes began to be dazzled with its shine. Presently she saw, or fancied that she saw, a figure coming towards her across the gold ; and then she passed her hand over her eyes, and shielded them for a little while.

When she looked up again she was almost startled to find that the vision had

not vanished. It looked more real now, and was coming nearer and nearer. She saw that it was a man, dressed in a light summer suit, and moving languidly, but not with the heavy motion of a tramp or a labourer. He drew nearer yet. She did not stir in her place, but her pulses seemed to stop beating, and all the wheels of time were standing still.

He came to a pause close to the low wall, and stood looking at her with a fixed dreamy gaze. The May light shone on his pale bronzed face and deep-grey eyes. His steadfast look seemed to go through and through her heart. How long did that silence last? About five seconds, perhaps; but to her it was an hour.

‘I did not even dream of seeing you,’ he said at last. ‘I only came last night — rather late. Have you been here long?’

'I arrived yesterday; my train got in at six in the evening.'

She never knew how she uttered the commonplace words. Another person seemed to speak them in her stead. There was silence again, but only for a moment.

'I followed you unawares,' he said. 'This is strange. How quiet the place is! It seems but yesterday that I went away. And you—are you well?'

'I have been ill,' she answered. 'My father died in November. I was left all alone in the world, and so I came back here.'

He laid a slender brown hand upon the ivy, and got over the little wall. Her breath came quickly, so quickly that her lips grew white. He looked at her anxiously, and with all the old tenderness in his glance.

‘I have startled you,’ he said regretfully;
‘and you are not strong.’

‘Oh, it is nothing, nothing. I get startled so easily now. It seems very silly, but I can’t help it.’

‘Of course you can’t help it. May I come and sit in my old place and talk to you?’

She smiled an answer, and drew aside her black skirt to make room on the bench. The warm blood was stealing back into her lips; a faint tinge of pink crept into her cheeks. She was more like the old girlish Bride again.

‘You are looking thin and worn,’ she said, remembering all that Cora had told her. ‘Were you ill in India?’

‘I had a fever; but I pulled through it pretty well. It was rather a severe illness, they said. There isn’t much left of me, you see.’

He turned towards her with a smile, and read the sadness in her eyes. Now that he was near she saw, all too plainly, the ravages that sorrow and sickness had made.

'Tell me about yourself,' he said earnestly. 'There are so many things I want to know. Isn't it like a dream that we should be sitting together in this old nook? I have often had such dreams. There were buttercups in that meadow when we said good-bye; do you remember?'

'Yes.'

'It was May-time. The honeysuckle was running over the wall, and you had some pansies in your dress. You see I don't forget anything. And now, how have you fared? You have been out into the great world?'

'You heard that my father came and claimed me at last?'

'Yes; my aunt Collington mentioned it

in one of her rare letters. You were a reigning belle last season. I was not surprised. That letter came while I was lying ill, and never dreamt of seeing you again.'

He spoke in a resigned, quiet tone, and waited for her to say something. But she dared not attempt to speak, and there was a brief pause.

'There isn't much to tell,' she said at last. 'I had a glimpse of town life, and then went back to Brackenhurst. Cora Wallace came to stay with me through the summer.'

'I thought there would have been more to hear.' He uttered his words with studied calmness. 'Aunt Collington told me that you were to be married to Lord Inglefield.'

'Yes, I was engaged to him. But we parted last August. Have I not said that I was alone in the world?'

He drew a long breath, and a flush rose to his bronzed cheek. Birds and bees filled up the silence, and a soft sigh of wind came whispering to the buttercups. She was intensely still. He stole a glance at the white hands folded in her lap, and saw that they did not stir.

Had she suffered through the loss of her lover? He longed to know, but he could not ask. That silence seemed as if it would never come to an end; and yet both feared to break it by making some trifling speech. So much depends, sometimes, on the breaking of a pause like this. She was the first to speak, and in speaking she felt as if she were taking her fate into her own hands.

'You may as well hear it all,' she said, in a quiet voice. 'Cora Wallace was, as you know, my friend. Well, one day my friend and my lover were out together, and she told him a story that he had never

heard before. It won't be new to you. It was the story of Hawthorn Island.'

'Miss Wallace told him that?'

'Yes, and he came back to me with reproaches. He had some reason to be angry, for he was a man with an ideal. The slightest breath, he felt, would dim a woman's glory. She must be lifted high above the common earth.'

'And he dared to say——'

'Don't blame him rashly! I was no longer the being he had thought me. It was scarcely my fault if he had idealized me from the first. I always had a haunting fear that I was not perfect enough.'

'Bride, this is too much!' he said, in a low, passionate tone. 'Was there no one to take your part? Did nobody go and——'

'Hush!' Her hand was laid lightly on his arm. 'I wasn't very sorry to get

my freedom. I never gave him my whole heart. It was wrong, I know; I wanted to give it, but I could not.'

'Why not? Oh, Bride darling, why not?'

'Don't make me tell you,' she whispered.

'I have been so ill—so unhappy—so lonely!'

He looked at her fixedly, and she could hear the loud throbbing of his heart. Tears swam in her sad blue eyes; her hand, still resting on his sleeve, was trembling.

'Poor child!' he said, gently taking her into his arms. 'They will all scold you for caring about me! No one will ever love you better than I do; but other men are more worthy of you, dear. A broken-down man, without friends or fortune—what will they say?'

Their lips met in a long kiss. Her hands stole up and clung about his neck.

‘Oh, Victor, never mind what they say! I have only had one love. I tried to make esteem, gratitude, confidence, do instead of love. But it won’t do; one must never put anything in love’s place. And I’m good enough for you, am I not? You have no high ideal? You will be satisfied?’

‘I should be hard to please if I were not,’ he answered. ‘Don’t talk so, darling. What does a man want with ideals? What he wants is a woman’s heart, herself, her life. And to love perfectly and entirely (as you can love)—that is a woman’s glory.’

THE END.

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